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5 Great Romances

MAY/JUNE 1986 • VOLUME 4 NO. 3

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5 Great Romances (ISSN 0738-0941) is published bi-monthly by Digest Publishing, Inc., J. Shapiro, President. Executive and editorial offices at 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Second Class postage paid at Fort Lee, N.J. and additional mailing offices. Subscription rates U.S. and possessions: 6 issues — \$10.50. Outside the U.S. \$10.00 additional per year. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence concerning subscriptions, write 5 Great Romances, 158 Linwood Plaza, Fort Lee, N.J. 07024. Please enclose latest address label for quickest service when writing about subscription. Printed in U.S.A. Digest Publishing, Inc., 1986. All rights reserved.



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Master Touch

Superstud Damion Tanner meets the challenge of his life in indifferent Sandi Hawkins. But luckily for him, Sandi's coolness is just a facade hiding an irresistible attraction that eventually brings her into his arms.

—JASMINE CRAIG—

With the dramatic flair acquired during twenty years as a Hollywood superstar, Gabriella Barini clasped her hand to her forehead and moaned. "You know I cannot tolerate any talk about doctors and hospitals. Do not mention those horrible words to me. *Dio mio*, but you are a cruel daughter."

Sandi counted silently to twenty and breathed deeply before saying "Mother, you're in acute pain. Next month you're

scheduled to start work in California on a new movie, and unless you have those gallstones removed, you won't be able to fulfill the terms of your contract. It's obvious that you need an operation. And since you always say that you prefer American doctors, I've made arrangements for you to enter the Medical Center in Los Angeles next week. There is nothing else to discuss."

Gabriella gave another pitiful groan. "I

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do not know how I managed to produce a child who is so horribly practical." She stroked the opulent folds of her blue satin robe and stared in bewilderment at her daughter's neat beige linen suit.

"It is amazing, but you even *look* practical. You could be beautiful, you know, if you only tried just a little. In fact, I sometimes think you have to try quite hard *not* to be beautiful. What you really need, Sandi, is a man. Just once I would like to see you so much in love that you forget to be rational."

A trace of exasperated laughter tinged Sandi's reply. "Rationality isn't necessarily a crime, Mother. Besides, sometimes you forget that I know more about human sexuality than you do."

Gabriella snorted. "The technical terms, perhaps. You know nothing of the blissful ecstasy of the emotions, the delicious agony of unrequited love."

"On the contrary, Mother, my clients tell me about it all the time. Look, I'm not going to let you change the subject. We're supposed to be talking about you, not about the inadequacies of my love life. I'm booked on a flight to L.A. tomorrow. Please come with me. You know it would be the sensible thing to do."

"You ask the impossible!" Gabriella rose from the sofa and flung her arms wide. "You have never understood my sensitive, artistic soul. Never!"

"I guess not." Sandi's voice was dry. She sighed. It would probably be best to leave Rome and return to the States and request her father's help. Gabriella Barini and Richard Hawkins had been divorced for more than twenty years, but Richard retained more influence over his ex-wife than any of her recent lovers. If her father was willing to tear himself away from work on his latest movie, he could persuade Gabriella to have the necessary surgery. The sooner she flew back to Los Angeles, Sandi decided, the better.

Her mind made up, she walked briskly toward the bedroom door. "Mother, I'm leaving for the airport at ten tomorrow morning. Shall I wake you up to say good-bye?"

Gabriella avoided her daughter's eyes. "If you wish."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then. Good night, sleep well."

Gabriella did not reply, and after waiting for several seconds in hopeful silence, Sandi left the bedroom, closing the door softly behind her.

The Dorothy Chandler Pavilion of the Los Angeles Music Center was crowded to its elegant rafters.

Damion Tanner loosened his collar and watched the master of ceremonies who was wisecracking his way to the grand finale, the presentation of the Academy Award for this year's Best Actor.

He smiled, although he hadn't heard a word the man had said. The professional, analytical part of his brain was still working, but the rest of his mind seemed to have closed down until there was nothing left except his almost obsessive need to appear unconcerned.

Tiffany Brandon, the co-star of Damion's successful television series, replaced the MC on stage. Her onstage companion was Demon Rex, American's latest singing sensation. Tiffany and Rex exchanged their carefully scripted lines of banter. Then Rex picked up the thick sealed envelope.

Seeing the television cameras pan in his direction, Damion exerted every ounce of professionalism to twist the tense muscles of his face into a convincing semblance of relaxation. He knew he had no real chance of winning the award, but he was determined to lose gracefully. He had been nominated for his performance in *A Dream of Darkness*, although he couldn't understand why. He had watched the

completed movie only once, but that was enough to convince him he was out of the running for an award. He certainly hadn't needed Richard Hawkins, his director, to warn him that the Oscar was far beyond his grasp.

"You don't have a hope, kid," Hawkins had said. "You have a fabulous body, Damion, and the Academy doesn't like fabulous bodies, particularly on men. The judges seem to think there's an inverse relationship between the size of your pectoral muscles and the amount of acting talent you have. And when you're classically handsome as well..."

A burst of tense audience laughter jerked Damion out of his reverie.

"The winner of this year's Academy Award for Best Actor is Damion Tanner for his performance in *A Dream of Darkness*."

He knew he hadn't heard Tiffany's announcement correctly. Too many nights of sleepless anticipation had undoubtedly distorted his perception.

He looked around the crowded auditorium. Nobody else was marching toward the stage, and the applause reached a new level of enthusiastic approval as he rose to his feet. Even as he looked, Richard Hawkins jumped to his feet, applauding wildly and shouting his congratulations.

Damion realized that Tiffany Brandon really *had* announced his name. He drew in deep, shuddering breath and walked quickly toward the stage.

Tiffany smiled as she held out his Oscar. He took it dazedly.

A sudden hush fell over the auditorium. "Thank you, members of the Academy," he heard himself say. "And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your generous applause."

A bit more of his brain came out of shock, and a few rational sentences began to form in the back of his mind.

"No actor turns in an award-winning performance by himself," he said quietly. "I would like to thank all of those people—all of the members of the team who helped to make *A Dream of Darkness* into a great movie. If Richard and other experienced professionals like him don't lose patience with me, I hope one day to turn in a performance that truly merits the award for Best Actor. Thank you again, all of you."

He held the golden Oscar high over his head in a traditional gesture of victory, scarcely hearing the roar of applause that greeted his departure from the stage.

With the help of some security guards, he fought his way to one of the dressing rooms through a throng of backstage wellwishers. The hallway was mobbed by reporters. For a split second, Damion felt a wave of utter weariness wash over him, but it vanished as soon as a reporter asked the first question. He had been a professional actor for fourteen years, and it had been drummed into him from day one that nobody—no star, no director, no writer—could become a success without the support of the press corps. He had been lucky so far, he reflected. The press had always been kind to him.

It was only later, when he was shut in the blissful quiet of the limo, en route to the celebratory ball, that he had time to think.

He knew exactly how an Oscar winner was supposed to behave—he'd done a brilliant job of impersonating one tonight. But he wasn't at all sure how Damion Tanner actually felt about winning an Oscar for the very first movie he'd ever appeared in.

At the ball, Damion was mobbed by reporters, friends, and acquaintances right up until dawn, when Richard Hawkins turned up to rescue him.

"Time to go and get breakfast," the director said, expertly detaching Damion

from a reporter and three public relations flacks. "Linda's going to make it for us."

Damion peered tipsily at the cute starlet standing at Richard's side. She was twenty-four, had blond curly hair, and was Richard's fifth or sixth wife.

If Richard hadn't gone through five other wives before finding her, Damion would have envied him Linda. For himself, he knew that one failed marriage was more than enough to last him a lifetime, and he had no intention of repeating the experiments, not ever.

Damion linked one arm through Richard's and the other through Linda's as they walked out of the ballroom. "I don't want to get married," he announced suddenly.

"Take my word for it, kid, I wouldn't want you to get married. It would be lousy for your image. Stay single and the women of America will thank you," Richard replied.

Grinning, Damion followed his companions into the limo and sprawled on to the cushioned back seat. At some point during the journey he realized he had sobered up, and he wished he hadn't. The trend of his thoughts was not reassuring.

Why wasn't he screaming his joy from the rooftops? He'd won the Oscar—the shimmering mirage that had sustained him through fourteen years of hard slogging, including two years at the start of his career when he'd often gone to bed hungry. This was definitely not the moment to be miserable.

When they arrived at the Hawkins's beachfront home, Richard and Linda began giggling and kissing. Damion watched them with good-humored resignation, then rang for the housekeeper. The Hawkinses had a live-in housekeeper who was probably already awake, and Linda looked as if she could use some black coffee.

The heavy door swung open, but it was

not the housekeeper who greeted them. A tall, slim young woman with dark hair and vivid green eyes stood silently in the entrance. Despite the early hour, she was immaculately dressed in a tailored beige suit and a cinnamon brown silk blouse. Her cool gaze swept over him just once—comprehensively—and then she turned toward Richard and Linda. Damion, unused to being so summarily dismissed, fought back a crazy impulse to grab her face and force her to look at him properly.

The woman finally spoke. "Hello, Linda, how are you? Hello, Dad, I need to talk to you. Hope you don't mind my stopping by."

Dad? Damion shot an astonished glance at Richard. He hadn't realized that any of the Hawkins marriages had lasted long enough to produce a child.

Richard cleared his throat as he approached Sandi and gave her an awkward hug. "No, no, of course, I don't mind, Sandi. It's wonderful to see you, sweetheart."

As they all moved into the living room, Damion was a bit surprised at how angry Sandi's faultless appearance made him feel. It inspired him with a crazy urge to ruffle her composure. He wondered how she would look with her dark hair pulled out of its smooth twist and her slim body stripped of its immaculate clothes. For some reason he found the image of a disheveled Sandi extremely erotic, but he pushed the picture out of his mind with more than a touch of impatience. Heaven knew it had been a long time since his last affair, but he must have been without sex for even longer than he'd realized if he was beginning to fantasize about this repressed stick of a woman.

It was her smile that got to you, he decided as he watched her. That damned tolerant smile made him think of the Mother Superior at a convent, inspecting a row of scruffy children. He wondered

what she did for a living. Probably a computer programmer or a high school math teacher. Definitely some rigidly conservative profession whose practitioners felt no need for human warmth or sympathy.

When they were all seated comfortably in the living room and Linda had gone off to make coffee, Richard turned to Sandi with a warm smile. "Well, sweetheart, I'm glad you're here because I want to introduce you to a very special friend of mine. You saw his fabulous performance in *A Dream of Darkness* but wait until you see him in the final version of *Floodtide*. He'll make your blood freeze in your veins, I swear it. Sandi, this is Damion Tanner. And Damion, this is my daughter, Alessandra Hawkins. We call her Sandi."

"Hello, Damion." If she was impressed at meeting him, she gave no sign of it. Her indifference ought to have been a refreshing change after the cloying adulation he'd received in the past few hours. Instead, he felt obscurely annoyed by his failure to impress her. His slow, sensual smile was practically patented, dammit! Why didn't it work on Alessandra Hawkins?

Sandi looked at him in assessing silence for a moment before turning to face her father.

"Dad, I have a favor to ask you, but I'll come back later to talk to you about it." For the first time Damion sensed an element of hesitation in her words. "It's about Mother," she added.

Richard looked up quickly. "About Gabriella? Something's wrong?"

Sandi smiled with a warmth that totally transformed her face. Damion discovered that he was holding his breath and let it out sharply, turning away to stare out the window.

"Nothing that you won't be able to put right," he heard Sandi say. "Don't worry about it, Dad. We'll talk about it later,

OK?"

Richard smiled. "Sure, honey. You know, we didn't realize that you were home from Italy or we'd have sent you tickets for the show."

"Oh, Lord, how could I have forgotten? The ceremony was last night! How did the awards go? Did *A Dream of Darkness* win?"

Richard's face stretched into a huge, satisfied grin. "My script won the award for Best Original Screenplay, and right at this moment you're gazing into the eyes of this year's Best Actor."

"I never gaze into men's eyes," Sandy said composedly, her smile vanishing. "Congratulations, Dad. Congratulations to you, too, Damion," she added politely. "It's almost unheard of for an actor to win an Oscar for his first movie, but I'm sure the judges knew what they were doing."

Richard beamed happily, but Damion had no difficulty detecting the knife blade beneath her soft words.

"Well, thank you, honey," he said, emphasizing the *honey*. Some instinct told him she would hate the casual Hollywood endearment. "But you're really too generous in your praise."

Just for a moment her gaze clashed with his. Green fire shone in her eyes, and he realized with a shock that their dislike was not only irrational but also mutual.

"I wasn't generous at all," she said with deadly sweetness. "I thought you were brilliant in the role, Damion. In fact, most of the time you were so convincing that it was hard to believe you weren't simply playing yourself."

His expression hardened. "Every actor draws on personal experience in interpreting a role."

He wanted to say more, but Sandi was already taking leave of her father, explaining that she was late for work.

"Perhaps you'd be kind enough to give

me a ride?" he asked abruptly. As soon as he had spoken, he wished he could rescind the offer. What in heaven's name had prompted him to suggest spending more time with Alessandra Hawkins, nature's perfect answer to the frost-free freezer?

Sandi rose, then smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from her spotless skirt and walked toward the door.

"Of course. It will be my pleasure to drive you home. If you're ready then, Damion, I'd like to leave right away. My first appointment is at nine."

He quickly took his leave of Richard, then followed Sandi out to the carport.

After giving Sandi directions to his apartment building, he settled into the passenger seat without looking at Sandi and stared morosely out the window. The more he thought about it, the less he understood why he was sitting beside a woman he didn't like and had absolutely no desire to know any better.

He stole a glimpse at Sandi's profile. She certainly didn't look as if she were bursting to converse with him. He sat up straighter in his seat as they drove along. Scarcely a woman he'd met could resist him once he made an effort to please her. Surely Sandi would soon prove she was no exception to the rule.

"Alessandra is a beautiful name," he said, turning on his most charming voice. "Was your mother Italian?"

"My mother is Gabriella Barini," Sandi replied, her voice matter-of-fact as she named one of the screen's most famous and most volatile stars.

"I had no idea your father was once married to Gabriella Barini."

"Nothing about their relationship was in the least bit secret," Sandi said dryly. "Didn't you ever read fan magazines when you were a child?"

"No." For a moment Damion forgot how much Sandi annoyed him and simply answered her question honestly. "Most

actors seem to be born knowing that they want to act. But when I was in school, acting was just about the last career I imagined myself following."

"A publicity handout I read said that you appeared in your first Off-Broadway production when you were nineteen," Sandi commented. "What were you doing in an Off-Broadway play at such a young age if you weren't interested in acting?"

"I discovered the theater during my freshman year at college. A friend recruited me for the Drama Club, and I played the chief witch in a Halloween extravaganza. From that moment on I was hooked."

She looked directly at him for the first time since they'd entered the car. "Chief Witch?" She laughed softly. It was the first time he had heard her laugh, and he was amazed at how much he liked the sound.

"You're home," she said moments later, drawing the Toyota to a smooth halt at the curb.

"Well, thanks for the ride, Sandi. We should have lunch some time."

Ironic laughter gleamed in her eyes. "Sure," she said. "Let's do that real soon, Damion."

He slammed the door of the Toyota with unnecessary violence and walked into his apartment building.

A single *small* dose of a woman like her, he concluded, was more than enough to last any normal man for a lifetime.

Early the next morning Sandi leaned back in the chair so that the makeup artist could smooth pancake foundation over her face. Now that she was actually at the television studios, she bitterly regretted her agreement, made weeks ago, to appear on Mark Kline's morning news show with Damion Tanner.

Sandi found herself thinking about

yesterday morning, when she had discovered Damion in her father's house. His mocking blue gaze had drifted over her dismissively, and she had been shocked to discover that she didn't want Damion Tanner to ignore her.

Sandi was bewildered by her own feelings. In her experience, movie stars invariably had giant-sized egos to match their giant-sized talents. Their obsession with their own careers not only made them disastrous parents, it also made them unfaithful spouses and unreliable friends. She had been thirteen years old when her father entered into his third marriage and her mother took on her seventh live-in lover. Right then, Sandi had made a decision never to get emotionally involved with an actor, and she had never regretted that decision.

Furthermore, her work at the clinic gave scientific backing to her opinion that movie stars might look terrific on the silver screen, but they weren't much fun to be around when the cameras stopped rolling.

The makeup man dusted powder across her nose. "There you are, Dr. Hawkins," he said, admiring his efforts. "You're all done."

She stared at herself in the mirror. On the whole, she looked pretty much as she always did—aloof, reserved, and unapproachable.

The makeup man summoned a young production assistant, who helped Sandi find her way to the lounge where Mark Kline's other guests were awaiting their turn on camera. As soon as she walked into the room, she spotted Damion Tanner, and her stomach lurched slightly, even as her breathing quickened.

For a while she thought she might avoid any conversation with him, but he looked up suddenly and his bright blue eyes met hers with the impact of a bulldozer crashing into a brick wall. Then he smiled.

Her mouth went dry, her heart pounded, and her palms became damp.

Sandi frowned. *Nobody's* smile could possibly have such a devastating effect on her. Her pounding heart and damp palms were undoubtedly caused by nerves. After all, she didn't often appear on television.

She had just reached this happy conclusion when Damion started to walk toward her. She took one more quick look at him, then concentrated on thinking neutral thoughts.

Her body, however, wasn't interested in neutral thoughts. It was an amazingly well tuned and efficient biological instrument. It registered Damion's high level of sex appeal and reacted accordingly. It pumped extra blood, it squeezed the air out of her lungs, it melted her bones and generally prepared her for instantaneous submission. Her brain sent out a few pitiful reminders that she disliked Damion Tanner and all that he stood for, but her body paid no attention to these sensible messages.

"Sandi, this is a pleasant surprise. Are you here with your father? I didn't know Richard was going to be on this show. I thought he did his final stint yesterday."

"He did," she snapped. How typical of the man to assume that she was here only in her role as Richard Hawkins's daughter! How typically, arrogantly chauvinistic! She injected all the frostiness she could muster into her voice. "Mark Kline invited me to discuss *A Dream of Darkness* in my professional capacity."

She was gratified to see that she had succeeded in surprising him. At that moment, the production assistant warned them that their time on the air had almost arrived, and Sandi was relieved by the interruption.

Mark Kline greeted them both with warm, courteous smiles and settled them into two comfortable chairs, one on either side of him. The recording light flashed

on.

"Welcome back," Mark said to his unseen television audience. "I think my next two guests will be of particular interest to us all. Damion Tanner, the incandescent star of *A Dream of Darkness* and winner of this year's Academy Award for Best Actor, needs no introduction."

There was applause from the studio audience as Mark Kline began to run through a list of questions which Damion fielded with practiced ease and considerable charm.

Then Mark Kline paused to draw breath.

"Some critics have suggested that the Academy rewarded you more for your superlative body than for your acting ability, Damion. How would you answer that criticism?"

"By suggesting that critics should see the film before they write their comments," Damion said curtly.

"I take it, then, Damion, that you don't consider yourself Hollywood's latest sex symbol?"

"I'm an actor," he said tersely. "In *A Dream of Darkness* I portray a young man who uses sex as a weapon in the battle he wages against the world. Naturally there are several explicitly sexual scenes in the movie. But I fail to see why those scenes turn me personally into a sex symbol. Movie critics, of all people, ought to be able to distinguish between the actor and the man."

"I'm sure we all agree with that final comment, and thank you for your frank remarks," Mark Kline said as he swiveled around to face Sandi.

"My other guest this morning doesn't view *A Dream of Darkness* from quite the same perspective as Damion Tanner does. In fact, she has some very specific objections to Mr. Tanner's role in that movie. Dr. Alessandra Hawkins works at the Laurence Clinic here in Los Angeles. She

is a psychologist with a doctoral degree in family counseling. In layman's terms we would call her a sex therapist."

Sandi heard a brief, strangled gasp from Damion's direction.

"Dr. Hawkins, would you explain to us why you find *A Dream of Darkness* such a disturbing movie?"

At that moment Sandi wished fervently that she was a hundred miles away from the studio and a million miles away from Damion Tanner. Fervent wishes, however, were not going to change the situation she had gotten herself into. She drew in a deep breath, determined to speak clearly and professionally.

"There are many aspects of *A Dream of Darkness* that I admire," she said, "but I think it provides a potentially harmful view of human sexual relations. In my work at the Laurence Clinic I encounter more and more young people who are afraid to commit themselves to an intimate relationship because they know they can never achieve the standards of apparent sensuality set by actors like Mr. Tanner."

"Apparent sensuality?" Mark Kline murmured.

"There is no evidence that in real-life situations Mr. Tanner's sexual expertise lives up to the standard portrayed so graphically in the movie."

Damion leaned forward in his chair. "Were you hoping for a real-life demonstration?" he drawled.

Sandi was furious at the blush she could feel rising in her cheeks. "No, Mr. Tanner, I was not."

"Just checking, honey. I never like to turn down a lady."

The audience tittered, and Sandi thought murderous thoughts. If he called her *honey* one more time, she wouldn't be answerable for the consequences.

Mark Kline's intervention saved her from saying something she would certain-

ly have regretted. "Would you tell us precisely why you find Mr. Tanner's performance so unsettling, Dr. Hawkins?"

"Certainly. Movies like *A Dream of Darkness* tell young men that in order to be successful human beings, they must look as attractive and as seductive as Mr. Tanner. Unfortunately for most people that's an impossible goal."

Damion bared his teeth. "I'm thrilled to know that you find me so irresistible, Dr. Hawkins."

She bared her teeth in return. "I don't find you irresistible, Mr. Tanner. I said that young people, who don't know any better, wish they could look like you."

"According to you, these hordes of misguided young people don't just want to look like me. They wish they could make love like me, too."

"You misunderstood my remarks, Mr. Tanner. I'm sure you make love just like anybody else, maybe even less effectively than most of my clients. But many young people don't realize that. They watch you seduce a woman in the movie, and they forget that you played the scene with the benefit of ten people directing your actions to ensure the maximum erotic effect."

"Hey, honey," Damion said softly, "How many times did you have to watch me make love before you arrived at your conclusions?"

"My name," she hissed, "is not honey. For your information, Mr. Tanner, it is *Doctor Alessandra Hawkins*."

Right at that moment, Mark Kline indicated that they had run out of time. Sandi was angry, and she didn't know whether to direct her anger at herself, at Damion, or even at Mark Kline, who had obviously engineered that confrontation. Walking out of the studio without once looking back, she was startled when she reached the elevator and found Damion standing right beside her.

"Half the gossip columnists in the United States watch that show," he said abruptly as he followed her into the elevator. "Do you realize what you've just done? By the time the supermarket tabloids have finished embroidering your comments, half the public will be wondering if this year's Academy Award went to a porno star."

"*A Dream of Darkness* is an interesting movie," Sandi said, "but I don't think it needed quite so many close-ups of you touching and collapsing into instant ecstasy. I don't suppose you're interested in scientific facts, but for your information, woman are physically incapable of that sort of instantaneous response."

"The movie wasn't intended as an illustrated manual for a sex education class; it was intended as entertainment. What's your problem, Doctor? Are you one of those people who takes out her frustrations by criticizing other people's sexual activities?"

"No, I'm not," she said, marching off the elevator so that he had to hurry to catch up. "But even if I were, I'd still be a whole heap better off than you are. At least I don't have to hide my fears of sexual inadequacy behind a series of fake come-ons."

Damion's expression hardened into one of contempt. "Just for the record, Doctor, I would like to state categorically that my performance in front of the cameras doesn't hide any fear of sexual inadequacy. In fact, I'm confident that I could seduce any unattached woman I set my mind to seducing."

"That's an easy claim to make when you know very well that I have no way of putting it to the test."

There was a slight pause. "Oh, but you do," he said finally. "You're an unattached female, Dr. Hawkins. I'll try my best to seduce you. You try your best to resist me. We should soon see whose per-

formance statistics hold up better."

"That's an absolutely ridiculous suggestion!" she exclaimed furiously. "And for heaven's sake stop calling me *Doctor Hawkins*! My name's Sandi. Now, if you'll excuse me, Damion, I'm already late, and I have clients waiting who really need my time."

"Frightened, Sandi?" he murmured.

"Of course not."

"Then why not agree to the experiment? Think what an interesting footnote it would make to your research project."

"All right, Damion," she said, suddenly deciding to call his bluff. "You have a deal."

She heard herself speak the words, but she couldn't quite believe she'd said them.

He smiled tantalizingly. "Good-bye, Sandi," he said. "I'll give you a call sometime this evening to set up our first date."

He then strode quickly away before she could retract her rash promise.

Sandi had no sooner set her car in motion than she realized just how much she regretted having accepted Damion's absurd challenge. She couldn't understand how she had agreed to do something so totally out of character.

When she reached the clinic she parked her car in the shade of an oleander bush and walked briskly inside, her common sense gradually returning. There was really no point in getting hot and bothered over something essentially trivial, she decided. Damion Tanner would never call her, so why waste any more time thinking about their ridiculous bet?

And if he actually called, she simply wouldn't accept his invitation. Fatigue induced insanity could only last so long.

Coming from a family like hers, Sandi thought wryly, she certainly needed to remain sane. She remembered that her mother still hadn't agreed to the gallstone operation, and her mind spiraled off into

a new set of worries.

The phone rang at midnight, an hour and a half after Sandi had gone to bed. It was Damion.

"Hello, Sandi," he murmured. "Do you know what I've been doing for the past fifteen minutes? I've been lying here in my lonely bed, imagining how you would feel curled up beside me. I want you, Sandi. I can't sleep because I want to make love to you so badly."

The rough vibrations of his voice found an echo in every hidden recess of her body, and she sighed tremulously. Fortunately the mists of sleep cleared from her brain just in time to prevent disaster.

"Good heavens, Damion, I was asleep! Why on earth are you calling me at this hour?"

"Well, I want to see you, Sandi. Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

Sandi reminded herself that his invitation was simply the first move in his planned campaign of seduction. She spoke quickly, refusing to acknowledge a tiny, irrational feeling of regret.

"Thanks for the invitation, Damion, but I don't think it would be a good idea for us to go out together. We really have nothing in common."

"Reneging on our bet?" he asked softly. "Are you so scared of what might happen that you're willing to concede victory before the first battle?"

"I'm not scared of anything," she said tartly. "Look, Damion, I'm sure you have better ways to spend your time than in attempting to seduce me. And I certainly have better things to do than waste a whole evening resisting you just to prove some academic point."

"I agree," he murmured. "So don't bother to resist, honey, and we'll both have a fabulous night. I guarantee it."

Irritation at his colossal arrogance replaced all her other tangled emotions.

"You know, Damion, sexual athletics on the part of the man, however talented he might be, will never ensure pleasure for the woman. So I'm afraid your guarantee is an empty one."

"Then show me how to give you pleasure, Sandi. Teach me how to make love the way you like it, the way you think it ought to be."

Her fingers closed tightly around the phone, and she swallowed hard. "If you're asking for professional counseling, Mr. Tanner, my fee is a hundred and fifty dollars an hour, plus expenses."

He smiled. "OK," he said. "I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven-thirty at your apartment, and we'll discuss scheduling over dinner. I'm looking forward to my first lesson. Good night, Sandi."

The next evening Damion arrived two minutes early dressed in skintight black jeans and a black velour turtleneck. His eyes were hidden behind huge aviator sunglasses.

Somehow Sandi knew instinctively that he had chosen his outfit expressly to annoy her, and her mouth curved into a tiny, reluctant smile. "Trying out for a part as a cat burglar?" she asked as he strolled into her living room and took off his sunglasses.

His mocking blue eyes roamed over her plain gray silk dress and matching shoes.

"No," he said with perfect gravity. "Are you trying out for a part as a nun?"

She laughed out loud, as she picked up her purse and led him back to the door. "All right, Damion, you win this round. But could you please leave your sunglasses in the car while we eat dinner?"

The intensity of his gaze suddenly made her knees shake. "Certainly I'll leave them," he said. "Tonight I want only to please you."

Later, when they arrived at the restaurant, the head waiter greeted them with

great deference and immediately seated them in a quiet, secluded corner booth. The place was crowded with elegant diners, but Damion made absolutely no effort to draw attention to himself, which Sandi found a refreshing change from many of the actors she knew.

When they had ordered, Damion leaned forward and circled his thumb gently over Sandi's knuckles. Striving for the appearance of calm, she removed her hand and picked up her glass, swallowing several quick mouthfuls of ice water.

Damion leaned back against the velvet-upholstered seat. "So tell me something about yourself, Sandi. What exactly do you do as a sex therapist?"

"I'm basically a family counselor as much as I'm anything else."

"It sure didn't sound that way when Mark Kline was describing your expertise on his television show."

"Damion, for heaven's sake! You of all people ought to know how easily facts get distorted on a talk show."

Grateful when they were interrupted by the arrival of their main course, she deliberately switched the conversation to Damion's career. After years of listening to her parents and their friends, she knew that few actors could resist talking about their triumphs.

Damion, she soon discovered, was somewhat of an exception. He was willing enough to talk, but she could sense the twin threads of self-mockery and reserve that ran through his speech.

"What happened after your outstanding success as the Halloween witch?" she asked, once they had sampled their excellent veal.

He spent an inordinate amount of time studying a boiled mushroom. "I got married," he said finally. "We were divorced three years later."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't know you were married, Damion."

He shrugged with apparent indifference. "It happened a long time ago," he said lightly. "Janet was an elementary education major, and I spent almost all my time with the university drama club. At the end of my second year I was picked to play Macbeth in our school production. Art Berenstein, a famous New York director, was in charge of the production, and a year later he got me a job in an off-off Broadway play. Janet's life goal was to be a teacher in a small town in the Midwest. She never came to New York and that was the end of our marriage." He drained his cup of coffee, then turned away to summon the waiter. "If you don't want dessert, Sandi, shall we collect the check and go home? I have an early start tomorrow morning and I'm sure you do, too."

"Er... yes. Yes, I'd certainly like to get home at a reasonable hour."

They settled silently into his car, a black Porsche with a scarlet interior. Sandi was uncomfortably tense, more ill at ease than she cared to admit. Damion's clothes and his car fit the stereotype that she wanted to put him in, a stereotype that she found extremely easy to resist. But so far the evening had not followed her expectations in almost any other regard. Far from trying to seduce her by staring into her eyes and whispering sweet nothings, Damion had directed a conversation that had been about as far removed from the romantic as it was possible to imagine. It was as if he had reached out and tried to touch her mind rather than her body. The truth was that she had found their time together fascinating.

Sandi stirred restlessly in the low-slung seat. Fascination, as she regularly told her patients and her students, was an inappropriate basis for any adult relationship.

"Thank you for going out with me this evening," Damion said softly, when they arrived at her apartment building. "I en-

joyed our time together very much."

"I enjoyed myself, too." She edged toward the car door, waiting for him to make his move.

His blue eyes were unfathomable as his gaze skimmed over her, and heat flared disturbingly beneath her skin.

"Why do you keep moving away from me?" he asked quietly. "Why are you so nervous?"

She swallowed hard. "Because of that ridiculous bet," she admitted. "I don't know why we made it."

"Our behavior yesterday was certainly a bit irrational," he agreed. "But then, strong emotions tend to give rise to irrational behavior, wouldn't you agree?"

"If we have any special feelings for each other, Damion, I think we both know they're negative ones."

He didn't deny her assertion. "Instant mutual dislike can be as potent a force as instant attraction," he said quietly.

Some new and indefinable tension entered the air between them. He touched his fingertips to her throat, stroking her skin softly until a dozen different pulses began to quiver in unison with the movement of his hands.

"Dr. Hawkins," he whispered, his breath warm against her cheek, "shall I tell you what we both felt for each other the first time we met?"

"No," she croaked, forcing her few functioning brain cells into action. "No, I don't want to talk about it."

"Perhaps you'd prefer that I show you what we both wanted? What we both still want?"

"No..."

"Sandi, my sweet, I'll have to give you lessons on how to say yes. It's quite easy once you get the hang of it." Laughter danced in his eyes as he cupped her face between his hands.

She closed her eyes, and her head tilted

involuntarily backward, baring her throat to his caressing fingers. If only he would keep his fingers still, she was quite sure she could speak, but the seductive movement of his hands never stopped.

"Open your mouth," he whispered thickly. "I want to kiss you."

His hands slid downward to cup her breasts in an expert, knowing caress. There was no way to conceal her immediate physical reaction.

"Tell me this is what you wanted, Sandi," he murmured. "Tell me this is what you've needed from the moment we first met. Let me come up to your apartment. I promise we'll do only what you want; we'll make love in the ways that please you most."

His practiced, seductive words dropped like stones into the sudden stillness of her mind, and her body froze into total, icy rejection. The very expertise of his touch reminded her, just in time, that Damion wasn't making love to *her*, he was merely seducing her body in pursuit of a bet that threatened his masculine ego. Horrified at what she had allowed to happen, she pulled herself out of his arms.

"That was an excellent try, Damion," she said coolly, "but you forgot something crucial. I'm trained to recognize the techniques of seduction, even when they're applied as expertly as you apply them."

For a split second he remained absolutely still. Then he passed his hand over his eyes, concealing them for an instant before he turned away. Finally he turned around, running his hand through his hair with a careless gesture. "I guess I should be flattered," he drawled. "Not every student gets such good grades on his first attempt." He placed his hand lightly on her shoulder and dropped a brief, impersonal kiss on her cheek.

"Thanks again for an enjoyable evening," he said. "I'll be in touch."

"Of course," Sandi said dryly. "Goodbye, Damion."

Since her return from Italy, Sandi had made five phone calls and paid two visits to her father's house without ever finding him available. She finally managed to catch him alone in his office the day after her date with Damion.

"Hi, kid," he said as his secretary showed her in.

"Hi, Dad," she said as she seated herself near him. "I'm glad I finally caught you. I suppose you've heard that Gabriella isn't very well. I spoke with her doctor while I was in Rome, and he told me she has gallstones that have caused a potentially severe infection of her gallbladder. She urgently needs an operation, or she might . . . she might be in real danger."

"But Gabriella doesn't like hospitals," Richard said. "She never did. She even insisted on delivering you at home."

"Yes, Dad, I know. But mother has finally agreed to fly over here to consult with an American doctor. If you tell her she needs to have this operation, there's a good chance she'll agree to have it. Will you come to the airport with me and try to convince her that she has to check into the hospital?"

"Why, sure thing, kid, it'll be a pleasure."

"The plane lands at two-thirty tomorrow. Can I pick you up here around two?"

Richard readily agreed and stood to walk with her to the door.

A few seconds later Sandi decided that the fates were not being kind to her. By some horrible coincidence her father escorted her into the reception area at precisely the same moment that Damion Tanner walked in from the hallway. Sandi closed her eyes and cursed with silent fluency. When she opened them, Damion

hadn't gone away.

His eyes mocked her with their swift, sardonic appraisal."

"Good morning, Dr. Hawkins. What a happy coincidence to find you here! I was planning to call you this afternoon. About our appointment this evening. I plan to pick you up at seven o'clock at your apartment, if that's convenient?"

"But we don't have an appointment this evening!" she protested. "You know we don't!"

Damion reached into the back pocket of his jeans and extracted a tiny leather-bound notebook. "But I have it written down right here. Look," he said appealingly. "My secretary has it written down here that we have a dinner date this evening. Do you know, I told my astrologer all about you this morning, and he was very relieved to hear I was consulting you."

"God forbid that I should disappoint your astrologer," she said with heavy sarcasm.

He beamed. "I knew you'd feel that way, Dr. Hawkins."

Sandi turned away, biting her lip to keep back a bubble of crazy laughter. Before she could compose her face, Damion had clasped her hand earnestly. "Thank you for agreeing to meet me tonight, Dr. Hawkins. I knew I could count on you."

Sandi sat down at her dressing table and stared angrily at her reflection. If she had a grain of sense, she would call Damion and tell him she wasn't going anywhere with him tonight—or any other night, for that matter.

This was positively the last time she was going to be manipulated by Damion Tanner, she decided. Tonight, if he attempted to caress her body into sexual submission, he would be in for a surprise. She had finally realized exactly how she needed to handle him.

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Damion

Tanner is on his way up, Dr. Hawkins."

She opened her apartment door and smiled her usual cool smile of greeting.

"You look very elegant tonight, Damion," she said lightly. "I'm impressed."

"I'm glad you approve. My astrologer told me that tonight is a time for dignified understatement."

A chauffeur-driven limousine waited for them downstairs, and Damion politely stood aside as she entered the huge car. They drove across town and ended up at a fashionable high-rise on a tree-lined street that Sandi recognized as the building Damion lived in.

Damion said casually. "I thought we could eat at my apartment tonight."

"That's fine with me. You'll be just as resistible inside your apartment as you are in the front seat of your car, Damion."

"This has nothing to do with our bet, Sandi. I wanted us to have a chance to get to know each other, and there aren't too many restaurants where we can talk without interruption. Since the Academy Award nomination, I've found it difficult to enjoy eating out."

Stifling a brief feeling of empathy, she got out of the car and walked quickly ahead of him into the lobby of his apartment building, wishing fervently that he didn't have a talent for sounding so darn sincere.

They took the elevator to the penthouse floor where a maid dressed in a pink nylon uniform waited at the apartment door.

"Dinner's ready to serve whenever you want it, Mr. Tanner."

"Thanks. Are you ready to eat, Sandi? I'm starving."

The sooner they ate, Sandi thought, the sooner she would be free to leave.

"Yes, let's eat now," she agreed.

The dining room table was spread with a sumptuous array of hors d'oeuvres. The maid placed a bottle of white burgundy

on the table and left the room.

Despite its elegance, Sandi didn't much enjoy their meal. Last night Damion had made the evening seem special. Tonight, however, he seemed distracted, as if his attention wasn't focused on the subjects they were discussing.

Later, when the maid announced that coffee would be served in the sitting room, Damion ushered Sandi into a small room furnished with a down-pillowed sofa and a low glass-topped table. A fire burned in the grate, infusing the paneled walls with a warm mahogany glow.

Sandi sat down on the sofa, sinking into the billowing cushions.

She hadn't intended to make any effort at conversation, but almost against her will she heard herself say, "Tell me about your new movie, Damion. My father is very excited about it."

Damion sat down beside her on the sofa. "It's about Brad Foster, a racing car driver who is framed for murder. There's a woman who helps him, and all the usual chase scenes. There's also a very good surprise ending. But the real significance of the movie is that it shows a man in the process of discovering that he's somebody quite different from the person he thought he was."

"Does Brad fall in love with the woman who helps him?"

"Yes, he does. Sheila, the woman who helps Brad, is a lawyer. She's as intellectual as he is physical. But they make love one night in a hayloft, and the suggestion that Brad and Sheila will live happily ever after is made pretty explicit. Personally, I think the ending is totally unrealistic. In the real world I'd lay heavy odds that Brad and Sheila would be heading for the divorce courts long before their first anniversary."

"Statistics aren't necessarily on your side," Sandi said quietly. "Brad and Sheila may love each other enough to

make the sort of lifetime commitment that a good marriage requires."

"Could be," Damion said cynically. "On the other hand, once the sexual thrill wears off, they may wake up one morning and wonder what the hell they're doing in bed together."

"That's certainly possible," she agreed. "What did Brad find attractive about the lawyer in the first place?"

"He's attracted to Sheila because she isn't like all the other women he's known. She isn't interested in his body, and she certainly doesn't give any impression of being interested in his mind. He eventually finds himself obsessed with the need to attract her attention. He's certain, you see, that she's never experienced real sexual passion, and without quite knowing why, he wants desperately to be the man who shows her what it's all about."

She swallowed hard. "I see. Why is Brad so certain Sheila's never known sexual passion? That's a pretty arrogant assumption, isn't it?"

Damion's gaze rested contemplatively on her lips. "A man always knows when a woman is sexually unawakened."

She breathed deeply, controlling an irrational spurt of anger. They were only talking about a movie, after all. There was no need for her to feel personally involved.

"I'm interested in Sheila," she said. "What were *her* motives for making love to Brad? It doesn't seem a very smart decision for a woman who's supposed to be an intelligent, well-educated professional."

"Doesn't it?" he asked neutrally. "You're a woman, so perhaps you can explain her motives better than I can."

He had moved closer to her on the sofa, and now his body was so near that its warmth reached out to engulf her, like the heat that warned of an approaching forest fire.

"Perhaps Sheila is more passionate

than she appears on the surface," Sandi said, swallowing hard. "Perhaps Sheila senses the loneliness and frustration hidden behind Brad's macho exterior."

Damion's fingers insinuated themselves into her hair, and she made no protest as he slowly drew out the pins.

"Poor Brad," he murmured, letting the hairpins drop unheeded onto the floor. "Poor Sheila. I'm beginning to think that they really need each other, don't you think?"

He didn't appear to expect an answer, which was just as well, since her vocal chords seemed to have ceased functioning. His hands moved expertly amid the tumbled strand of her hair.

"Don't frustrate us both any longer, Sandi. You have a mouth made for kisses, and the image of it torments my dreams."

Her heart stopped pumping blood and began to pour liquid fire through her veins. She vaguely remembered that she'd devised some clever plan to deal with just this sort of situation. But at this precise moment neither the plan nor the reasons for escaping seemed important.

He didn't pull her into his arms, but she moved against him; drawn by the demands of her own body. His breath was warm as he bent to kiss her.

The world began to spin around her, and the pressure of his mouth became the new center of her universe. He was such an expert lover, Sandi thought dreamily. His sense of pace was superb.

Her dreamy thoughts swam hazily into focus and began to crystallize, stark solid, and unwelcome at the forefront of her mind. *Of course* Damion was a technically superb lover! Why wouldn't he be, when he was the graduate of an uncounted multitude of women's beds? For the second time in two days he had managed to make her forget that he wasn't yearning to become her lover — he was merely anxious to win their bet.

The liquid fire running through her veins cooled down into ordinary, everyday blood, and her heart stopped trying to imitate a trip-hammer. Damion immediately sensed her withdrawal.

"What's wrong, Sandi?" he whispered huskily.

She edged away from him. Now, when it was almost too late, she remembered that she had worked out a fail-safe plan for coping with Damion's lovemaking. Nothing could turn a man off more surely than the suspicion that he'd appeared ridiculous.

"Actually, your lovemaking technique is so superb, Damion, that I'd like to jot down a few notes. You remember that you agreed I could take some notes for the research paper I'm working on?"

"You want to take *notes*?" he asked. "*Now*?"

"Well, if you wouldn't mind too much it would be tremendously helpful if you could kiss me again, but sort of take the kiss step by step, if you understand what I mean. You have a unique way of placing your hands that makes it very comfortable for the woman."

"Comfortable!" he exclaimed.

"Well, yes. I'm sure you could give me some useful hints to pass on."

Damion stood and walked silently across the room to pour himself a brandy.

"My dear Sandi," he murmured when he returned. "How expertly you manage to cut a man down to size."

For a moment his eyes seemed oddly desolate. Then he tossed back his brandy. "Would you like me to take you home now?"

"There's no need for you to come out again tonight, Damion. I've known the chauffeur who drove us here for ten years. Bill and I will do just fine together."

"As you wish." He sounded entirely indifferent to her decision.

They exchanged only basic courtesies

as they rode down to the lobby. Sandi watched the light inside the elevator flicking from floor to floor. In one fell swoop she had achieved her goals, she reflected bleakly. The chances of Damion calling her again must be close to zero, and for what it was worth, she could probably claim she had won their stupid bet.

She wondered why so much success had left her feeling so thoroughly miserable.

Next afternoon, as arranged, Richard and Sandi picked up Gabriella at the airport. She looked radiant, and smiled graciously at everyone who recognized her. As soon as they got in the car, however, Gabriella leaned back against the upholstery, expelling her breath on a sigh of pure exhaustion. Sandi looked at her mother's pale, fine-drawn features and bit her lip anxiously.

Richard was visibly perturbed as he watched his ex-wife. "These gallstones are really getting you; I can see that, Gabriella. You're whiter than a sheet."

"What nonsense have you been telling your father?" Gabriella asked angrily.

"I told him you had an infected gallbladder that needed to be removed or you may have serious problems."

"She's right, Gabriella," Richard interjected. "Now, look, honey, I know you don't like hospitals, but the surgeons here in California include some of the most highly qualified specialists in the world. They can take care of a simple little problem like yours in half an hour."

"Ha! If the surgeon's knife does not slip, or the anesthetist does not fall asleep over his gas pumps!"

Her father sighed, but Sandi was surprised and grateful to see how patiently he continued to deal with Gabriella's fears. All the way to the hotel he held her hand and attempted to reason with her.

When they got to the Bel Air Hotel,

where Gabriella would be staying, Richard kissed his ex-wife goodbye, making her promise to think seriously about having the operation. Sandi accompanied her mother to her room, where Gabriella took a bath and freshened up, insisting irritably that she wasn't the least bit tired. She snapped at Sandi's suggestion that they order dinner from room service.

"I am neither dead nor senile, Sandi, so there is no reason for me to hide in my room. In a minute I shall decide who will take me out to dinner tonight. It must be someone exciting, someone who will make me laugh."

Sandi concentrated on removing a speck of fluff from her gabardine skirt. "How would you like to have dinner with Damion Tanner?" she asked. "I could call him and see if he's free."

Gabriella stopped her restless pacing and stared at her daughter. "Damion Tanner?" she said with far too much interest. "You mean the Damion Tanner who won the Oscar for his performance in *A Dream of Darkness*?"

"Er, yes. That's the one."

Gabriella's gaze narrowed speculatively. "This Damion Tanner — he is your lover?"

"Of course not!" Sandi denied vehemently.

"No, of course he isn't," Gabriella agreed. She sighed sorrowfully. "It was foolish of me to ask. Please do call Damion Tanner. I would very much like to have dinner with him this evening."

Sandi walked reluctantly to the phone. The more she thought about it, the more disastrous her impulsive suggestion seemed. Even more reluctantly she placed a call to Damion's home.

"Er...hello, Damion. This is Sandi Hawkins."

There was an infinitesimal pause. "Hello, Sandi."

She cleared her throat again. "Dam-

ion, I wondered if you would care to have dinner with me this evening. My mother is in town and she would very much like to meet you."

"I see." If she hadn't known better, she'd have suspected she detected the faintest trace of disappointment in those two curtly spoken words. "Naturally, I'd be delighted to meet Gabriella Barini. I'll pick you up at your apartment at seven," he said.

Sandi drew in a deep breath, hoping Gabriella wouldn't notice the heat flaming in her cheeks. "I'll wait downstairs in the lobby of my apartment," she said. "And thank you, Damion. I know my mother is very much looking forward to having dinner with you."

"And how about you?" he murmured. "Are you looking forward to seeing me, Sandi?"

"Of course," she said with a coolness that belied her racing pulse and pounding heart. "You're a most entertaining companion, Damion. I'll see you at seven."

She hung up without waiting to hear his reply.

Two hours later, back at her apartment, Sandi slipped her earrings into place and glanced quickly into the mirror. She had chosen a green silk dress that gleamed with iridescent fire when it caught the light, and her high-heeled black sandals emphasized the length of her legs and the slenderness of her ankles.

Damion arrived less than a minute past seven.

"You look beautiful," he said quietly when she met him in the lobby.

"Thank you," she said huskily. She flashed him a tiny smile. "I really appreciate your coming out on such short notice, Damion. Did your astrologer tell you to be kind to annoying new acquaintances or something?"

His gaze touched briefly on her mouth.

"No," he said. "This was one of those rare decisions that I made all by myself."

"I saw your father late this afternoon," Damion said while they were driving. "He mentioned that Gabriella was in L.A. for a medical checkup. I hope there's nothing seriously wrong."

"She needs to have a gallbladder operation," Sandi said. "But my mother is terrified of hospitals and surgeons, so I'd be very grateful if you could speak positively about the doctors here in California."

"I'll be happy to. And if your mother doesn't bring the subject up, maybe I can find some way to introduce it."

The limousine drew to a halt outside the hotel. They walked quickly through the lobby and took the elevator to Gabriella's suite.

Gabriella looked her most dazzling as she flung open the door and greeted them, her smile radiant.

Damion kissed Gabriella's hands, bowing over them with all the panache of a latter-day Errol Flynn. As he murmured a string of graceful compliments, Sandi saw that her mother literally glowed with pleasure.

"You have much to be proud of yourself," Gabriella commented. "Your performance in *A Dream of Darkness* was memorable."

Sandi was surprised by the warmth of her mother's tone. Where her profession was concerned, Gabriella didn't bestow compliments lightly.

Damion actually blushed. "Thank you," he said. "Praise coming from you is certainly praise worth having. I've made reservations for us at Ma Maison," he added, naming one of the most expensive and fashionable restaurants in the city. "I thought you would enjoy eating there."

"It is my favorite place in Los Angeles, Gabriella acknowledged happily. "I hope there will be one or two people dining

there besides the tourists.”

From the moment of their arrival at the restaurant Damion and Gabriella were the focus of attention. Their table, placed prominently in the center of the room, enabled them to see and be seen by virtually everybody. People streamed by constantly. While a fan launched into a long conversation with her mother, Sandi felt her gaze draw irresistibly toward Damion. The light from the table lamp burnished his dark hair with an ebony gleam, and in profile, his face betrayed an austere masculine beauty that she had never before allowed herself to notice. She watched as his lean fingers toyed with a bread stick, and she realized with a sense of overwhelming shock how much she wanted those fingers to caress her body.

“Sandi tells me you have a slight health problem that needs to be taken care of, Gabriella,” Damion said casually when the fan moved on. “I understand you might need a surgeon, and I can recommend an excellent one, a Dr. Matthews.”

Gabriella’s eyes darkened with anger. “Sandi talks too much about matters that don’t concern her,” she said harshly. “I do not plan to have an operation in the near future, so I do not need the name of your expert surgeon. Hospitals are not places for a civilized human being.”

Damion reached across the table and touched her hand. “Gabriella, forgive me, but I’ve admired your acting for many years, and your career is important to me. Very few people in our industry combine your natural talent with your capacity for long hours of dedicated work. But you can’t film day in and day out for three months when you’re in pain. You can’t do justice to your talent when you wake up each morning wondering if this is the day you’re going to die.”

Sandi drew in a sharp breath, but Gabriella merely glanced once at Damion, then looked away. “It seems that I have a

delightful choice ahead of me,” she said. “I can die quickly on the operating table, or I can refuse to have surgery and die at my leisure.”

“Removing gallstones is a routine, low-risk surgical procedure, so the choice you have to make is between dying because of an irrational fear or overcoming that fear and living a long and healthy life.” His voice softened. “What about it, Gabriella?”

She lifted her head, her chin tilted proudly. “I have a couple of weeks before filming begins on my next movie. There is no reason, I suppose, why I should not make an appointment with your surgeon.”

Damion raised her fingers to his lips. “Bravo, Gabriella,” he said gently.

Gabriella not only made, but kept her appointment with Dr. Matthews and agreed to check into the hospital within forty-eight hours of the doctor’s initial examination.

Despite the pressure of work at the clinic, Sandi volunteered to spend the night before Gabriella’s operation sleeping on a cot in her mother’s room, and Dr. Matthews greeted her offer with visible relief. He prescribed sleeping pills, but Gabriella didn’t sleep much that night. Her fears were as alive as ever and she was convinced she’d die on the operating table.

Next morning, Gabriella went into the operating room on time, but Sandi got increasingly worried as her stay there lengthened abnormally.

As she took another nervous swing around the small waiting room, some slight sound made her glance up, and she saw Damion standing silently in the doorway.

“It occurred to me that you might need a little moral support,” he said softly.

She was dismayed by the pleasure she felt at his simple words. “It’s very good of

you to come," she said.

"A resident surgeon told me it will be at least another half-hour before there's any word from the operating room. Have you eaten lunch? Would you come and have a snack with me?"

She agreed, since it seemed churlish to refuse when he'd been kind enough to take time out of his hectic schedule to come to the hospital.

"You look tired," he said, when they sat down at a table in the cafeteria. "I guess the past couple of days have been tough for you."

"They could have been worse," she said, beginning to eat some yogurt. "Thanks again for your help, Damion. Gabriella wouldn't be in the hospital right now if it hadn't been for you."

"I think you're overestimating my influence," he said. "Tell me, Sandi, has your mother always relied on you as much as she does nowadays?"

Sandi stared at him stupefied. "Relied on me! Damion, for heaven's sake! My mother considers me only one stage removed from certifiable. She admires only two qualities in a woman — acting talent and the ability to attract exciting men. As far as she's concerned, I'm abysmally lacking in both areas."

"I've often wondered how couples end up producing children who are so different from themselves," Damion remarked. Laughter touched his eyes. "It's difficult for me to imagine what it must have been like to be raised in Hollywood with two dynamic personalities like Gabriella Barini and Richard Hawkins for parents."

"It was very exciting," Sandi said flatly.

"That bad, huh?" His eyes gleamed with sympathetic understanding. "Where did you go to school, Sandi?"

"Oh, in various places. My parents had a very flexible custody arrangement. Depending on the state of their love lives,

I was either very much in demand or very much in the way."

Damion's expression didn't change, but somehow she knew her words had affected him. "Neither of them was deliberately negligent, you know. They just always had more important things on their minds than whether I got an A or a C on my history term paper."

"Did you rebel?" he asked. A hint of compassion touched his mouth. "In your situation a lot of kids would have slept around or done drugs in an effort to attract their parents' attention."

"I never got involved in either of those scenes. But I did rebel," she admitted, "by becoming the calmest and most highly organized person possible."

He suddenly covered her hand in a warm, firm clasp. "You don't have to be calm and organized with me, Sandi," he said softly. "When we're together you can be whatever you want to be." He touched his finger lightly against her cheek and smiled faintly. "But you know that, don't you?"

She stared at him, not trusting herself to reply because she realized suddenly just how badly she wanted to let all the barriers down.

He released her hand abruptly and leaned back in the chair. "My parents firmly believed that children couldn't be trusted to make important decisions," he said, and she was grateful for the casual shift in the direction of their conversation. "They even selected what classes I should take when I was in high school. Later, they even picked my wife for me. Janet was someone they loved and admired because she was sensible and organized, and wanted her life to be a copy of theirs. They stood by silently as she tricked me into marrying her by sleeping with me and, a month later, claiming she was pregnant. It all was a lie, so I took off for New York to become an actor."

He paused, visibly upset.

Sandi touched his arm hesitantly. "You could never have made your marriage work, Damion. You and Janet had goals that were totally incompatible. You should stop feeling so guilty about what happened."

"I should also stop baring my soul to a trained psychologist," he said, his voice notably dry.

"I made that suggestion as a friend," she said. "Not as a psychologist."

"Is that what we are to each other?" he asked quietly. "Are we friends, Sandi?"

Something in the atmosphere changed, filling the space between them with an almost palpable awareness. A nurse came up to their table, breaking a tension that Sandi was beginning to find unbearable.

The nurse told them that Gabriella was back in her room and that Dr. Matthews was waiting to talk to Sandi. They rushed upstairs. Dr. Matthews explained that they had some trouble during the surgery, but that now everything was fine. Anxiety and relief caused Sandi to burst unexpectedly into sobs.

Damion stood very still for a moment; then he took her into his arms and pressed her face hard against his chest. He cradled her gently, stroking her hair.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his shirt. "I don't know why I did that."

"Because you're exhausted," he said. "Because you love your mother."

Sandi moved reluctantly out of Damion's arms. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose, then determinedly tucked a few stray wisps of hair back into her chignon. She opened the door of her mother's room and paused to look once more at Damion.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you for everything."

The decision not to see Sandi Hawkins was an easy one for Damion to make, but

implementing it was considerably tougher. After Gabriell's surgery he had never intended to see Sandi again. And yet, here he was, about to pick her up at the clinic.

Damion frowned as he drove. He was no longer sure how he felt about Sandi.

Somehow, somewhere along the line, he had decided he desperately wanted to take her to bed. Not because of their ridiculous, childish bet, but because he was slowly being driven crazy by the need to make love to her.

And yet when he was with Sandi he couldn't hold his interest at a purely physical level. He kept experiencing the uncomfortable urge to reach out and touch her mind. He wanted to discover the real woman he suspected was hidden behind her calm features, immaculate hairdo, and wrinkleproof clothes. He even found himself telling her things he had never told anybody else, simply for the pleasure of watching the enchantment of one of her rare smiles.

He arrived at the clinic and went upstairs to Sandi's office.

"Hello, Damion," she said, greeting him with a pleasant smile that made him gnash his teeth in silent fury. Couldn't she look even a little bit excited to see him? Except when she worried about her mother, didn't she ever lose her cool?

"I really appreciate your coming to pick me up, Damion," she continued casually, and he looked away, resisting the crazy temptation to drag her into his arms and kiss her until she was hot, flushed, panting, and not even a little bit courteous.

"It's no bother to drive you to the hospital," he said. "I'm glad Gabriella feels ready to receive visitors."

They talked very little during the drive to the hospital. When they got there they saw Gabriella was pale, but all in all she looked remarkably well for a woman

who'd just gone through major surgery.

After a while, a nurse arrived carrying a dinner tray and Gabriella accepted her meal with a grimace of distaste. "My dears, you may as well go away," she said. "I shall have no energy to talk to you, even if you stay. Go and eat something exciting, so that at least I can imagine you two enjoying your dinner, even if I must suffer."

As soon as they were in the elevator, Sandi smiled up at Damion. "I think she's well on the way to recovery, don't you?"

"It certainly seemed like it to me." He hesitated for a moment. "Would you like to come back to my apartment for dinner?" he asked. "I was planning to make tacos, and I guarantee my recipe is the best this side of Mexico City."

"With an offer like that, how could I refuse?" She smiled, not one of her polite smiles, but the enchanting smile that came so rarely. He stared at her mouth, momentarily transfixed by the intensity of his desire to kiss her.

The fierceness of his need annoyed him. The sooner he got her into bed and made love to her, the sooner he could get her out of his system and move on to more important things.

A half an hour later, he let them into the apartment, then led Sandi into the kitchen.

"How about a Mexican beer?" he asked.

"Sounds wonderful."

He took a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator, flipped off the cap, and handed it to her. She swallowed deeply and sighed with undisguised contentment.

"I feel more mellow already, Damion. I'm not going to offer to help. I'm just going to sit here, drinking beer and admiring your skill at the stove."

She watched as he crumbled ground beef into a sauce and added a touch of

salt. Then, he covered the pan of ground beef, lowering the heat to a slow simmer.

"We have to wait half an hour for this to cook," he said. "Are you starving?"

She shook her head.

"Then how about grabbing another cold beer and taking it into the den?" he suggested. "The sofa in there is a lot more comfortable than these bar stools."

"Sounds like a good idea," she said, the faintest trace of huskiness lingering in her voice.

He led the way down the carpeted hallway, his mind a kaleidoscope of conflicting thoughts. Half an hour ago he had fully intended to seduce Sandi, but now he felt a confusing tenderness toward her that was more protective than sexual.

"Make yourself at home," he said, curtly, walking over to the stereo to put on a tape. Soon a soft, haunting melody was wafting through the room.

Sandi stood absolutely still in the middle of the room, her hands clenched tightly around the unopened beer bottle, tension written in every tight line of her body.

"What is it?" he asked softly. "What's wrong, honey?" The endearment slipped out almost before he noticed it.

She closed her eyes. "I'm scared," she whispered. "I don't want to fall in love with you, Damion."

His heart started to pound erratically. "You don't have to fall in love with me," he said. "I don't want to fall in love with you, either."

"I'm not going to fall in love with you," she said, determination in her voice. "Just because I want to go to bed with you, it doesn't mean anything special."

He let his breath out very carefully. "When we make love," he said softly, "it doesn't have to mean anything we don't want it to mean."

"Damion, it's crazy for us to make love! What we feel for each other is

irrational."

"Irrational, maybe, but very powerful." He drew her against his chest. "Let me make love to you," he murmured. "Show me how I can pleasure you, Sandi."

Color flared in her cheeks. Her eyes drifted closed, and he felt her body tremble in his arms. "Tomorrow, we'll both regret this," she whispered.

Without speaking he reached out to undo the first of the tiny pearl buttons at the high neckline of her blouse. Pushing the blouse from her shoulders, he let it fall unheeded on the floor as he leaned forward to kiss her.

He had meant to take his time, drawing his lips temptingly over hers, demonstrating the wealth of his experience and the technical expertise of his kisses. But as soon as her mouth opened beneath his, he forgot everything he had ever learned in any other woman's arms.

She shuddered within the tight circle of his arms, but her lips moved persuasively against him, and he knew it was desire, not fear, that caused her body to tremble.

He picked her up to carry her over to the sofa. Her body felt light and soft in his arms, and she didn't resist as he lowered her on the pillows and swiftly removed the remainder of their clothes.

Then she reached out, pulling him toward her, pressing her mouth urgently against his. He could feel her heart beating wildly against his chest.

"I want you, Damion," she said huskily. "I... need you. Please don't wait any longer."

For an instant he felt a familiar surge of male triumph leap through his body. Then the triumph faded, to be replaced by a nameless yearning, a longing so intense that it was physically painful. This lovemaking was different from anything he had experienced before. With a shattering sense of self-discovery, he realized he wanted to tell her he loved her.

"I want you more than I ever thought I could want any woman," he said huskily. "You're beautiful, Sandi." Crazy, inadequate words to express what he was feeling!

He kissed her lingeringly as he eased himself down on top of her and her dark warmth sealed around him, relieving the aching pressure in his loins.

His desire grew until it consumed him, an agonizing need demanding release. She arched against him in one final convulsive movement, her softness dissolving inextricably into his power. Damion was no longer sure whether he felt agony or joy; he knew only that he had never before felt anything so intense.

She glanced up, her eyes bright and unfathomable. "Damion..." she murmured.

He touched his finger to her swollen lips. "Thank you," he said softly. "For making love to me."

Sunlight pouring through a chink in the heavy drapes woke Sandi early the next morning. For a moment she lay still, luxuriating in the feel of Damion's hard, lean body pressed close to her own. But then fear set in.

Her response to his lovemaking had been shattering in its emotional intensity and frightening in its sheer physical passion. Her professional training had taught her everything about the theory of sexual relationships, but last night with Damion she had learned for the first time what it meant to make love.

Panic washed over her in a heated wave. She couldn't afford to make love with Damion again; it was too threatening. He was a professional actor, dedicated to a demanding and soul-consuming profession, and she knew he had no time in his hectic schedule for a permanent relationship.

And she, Dr. Alessandra Hawkins, was

a sensible woman who had no room in her life for casual sex and meaningless affairs.

She was so lost in depressing thoughts that the touch of Damion's hand against her cheek startled her.

"Well, hello there," he said softly.

"Hi."

"Hey, how come you're looking sad and gloomy. Did I forget to tell you that sad faces are strictly against house rules?"

She wriggled a little closer to the edge of the bed and managed to produce a smile.

He ran his fingers over the blue percale sheet and up onto her stomach. Unthinkingly she placed her hands on his tanned chest, stroking the mat of springy dark hair beneath her fingers. "Have you ever fallen in love, Damion?"

For an instant his expression was shuttered; then he shrugged. "No," he said coolly. "I don't think I ever really have. What about you, Sandi? Have you ever been in love?"

Not until I met you, she thought. She squeezed her eyes shut, pushing the treacherous knowledge away. "No," she said. "No, I've never really fallen in love."

He was so close now that she could feel the strong, steady beat of his heart against her bare breasts. What was he thinking as he looked at her? Did he really see *her*, she wondered, or was she just one more in an endless parade of women?

"You're so beautiful, Sandi," he murmured as if in answer to her. Hungrily his lips touched her hair, her eyes, her face, before turning to her mouth as if he were starving for the taste of it.

She made a token effort to evade him, but he ignored her resistance, cupping her face in his hands and kissing her anyway.

She clutched her hands around his neck, drinking in his kiss. Her universe shrank until it contained nothing except the taste of him on her lips and the touch of him against her skin. His breath seared

her cheek as he moved on top of her, filling the aching void within. Her body welcomed his presence, shuddering with delight.

The ache of her desire intensified until she dug her fingernails into his back and arched her body upward in a silent, desperate plea for release.

"I love you, Sandi," Damion said, and she cried out as her body shattered into a million star-points of ecstasy.

She was dozing, less than half awake, when a quick tap sounded on the bedroom door.

"Mr. Richard Hawkins is here, Mr. Tanner," she heard the housekeeper say. "Should I ask him to wait?"

"Yes, that would definitely be a good idea—"

"Like hell I'm going to wait," Richard's voice boomed out from the corridor. "I've been waiting ten days already for you to read this damned script, and the first option runs out tomorrow."

Richard strode into the dimly lit bedroom and walked to the windows, not looking at the bed.

"Good Lord almighty, Damion, it's almost noon." He pulled back the drapes, flooding the bedroom with sunlight. "Get rid of your popsie, and let's get on with some work."

Richard swung around and finally took a good look at the bed. Sandi felt herself blush from her scalp all the way down to the soles of her feet.

"Er, hello, Dad."

Her father looked at her astonished, then glanced away. "Good morning," he said curtly. "What the devil are you doing taking Sandi to bed?" he asked Damion, but his tone conveyed astonishment at Damion's choosing to do something so strange, rather than outrage at his daughter's being seduced.

"If you'd leave so Sandi and I can get

dressed, maybe we could talk about this later."

"Well, okay," Richard grunted reluctantly. "But you'd better get your act in gear, Damion. I can't believe it! Taking Sandi to bed when you have a script to read!" He marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"I'm sorry about that," Damion said quietly. "Nancy, my housekeeper, would never have let anybody in if she'd known I had... company."

"No, I'm sure Nancy is superbly trained." Sandi got up, wrapping herself in the top sheet. Logically speaking it was a bit late for modesty, but right now she wasn't feeling very logical, whereas Damion was handling the situation with all of his usual aplomb.

There was a moment's pause. "Sandi, this isn't the moment to talk. Your father's waiting for me to read that script—"

"Please don't worry about a thing," she interrupted, walking toward the bathroom. She was so angry and hurt she could hardly see straight. "I was born in Hollywood, and I know options on a hot script take precedence over discussions with last night's popsie." She was impressed with how calm she managed to sound. "You won your bet and gave me a fun time in the bargain. Thanks for a great night. What more could we possibly have to say to each other?"

When she reentered the bedroom, no one was in sight. Her hands shook as she sat down in front of the mirror and pulled her hair into the tightest bun possible. Her pride was hanging in tatters around her, but she was determined to cling to whatever shred of dignity remained.

The living room door was ajar. She knocked lightly on it and walked in. Her father and Damion were huddled on the sofa, pages of manuscript strewn all over the room.

"I'm just leaving," she said coolly.

He looked up dazedly, his eyes scarcely focused.

"Good-bye, honey," he said, his gaze returning almost immediately to the pages in front of him. She had the distinct impression he'd called her honey because he couldn't remember her name. "I'll phone you some time this evening," he added vaguely.

She didn't expect him to call her, so she wasn't surprised when Saturday night came and went without a single ring of her telephone. Sunday the phone was similarly silent, and by Sunday evening she had managed to convince herself she would probably live even if he didn't call. She reminded herself that he had demonstrated with humiliating thoroughness that his career was a great deal more important to him than their brief affair.

But he did say he loved you, some inner voice protested.

The therapist in her snorted a reply. Men are supposed to murmur words of endearment when they're making love.

A huge bunch of red roses waited in her office Monday morning with a large white florist's card attached to the cellophane wrapping. There was no envelope, so the message—in oversized writing—was left plain for everyone to see: "I'm free at seven tonight. My place or yours?" There was no signature.

For about two seconds she couldn't make up her mind whether to scream with rage because of his arrogance or leap with joy because he still wanted her. Fury won out. She'd be damned if she was going to call him back, nor did she have any intention of being home if he happened to stop by her apartment.

She rummaged around on her desk until she found an invitation to a professional seminar being held that evening. She drove straight from the clinic to the lecture hall and didn't get back to her

apartment until very late.

Her phone rang five minutes after she got home. "I missed you this evening," Damion said softly. "Why didn't you answer my invitation, Sandi?"

"Why should I answer such an arrogant message? Why didn't you sign your note? Do you think you're the only man who asks me out?"

"No," he said. "But I hoped I was the only one who was important to you."

Her pent-up breath exploded into the phone. "Like I'm important to *you*, Damion? Like I was so important that for two whole days after the first time we made love you were too busy to call me?"

"Sandi, those were special circumstances."

"Where movies are concerned, there are *always* special circumstances."

There was a short pause. "We can't talk on the phone, Sandi. We have too many misunderstandings to clear up. Will you be home tomorrow evening?"

"No, Damion," she said firmly. "I'm not going to be home tomorrow evening."

She hung up the phone and cried for a solid hour until she finally fell asleep.

Sandi was thrilled when Gabriella Barini left the hospital two days later and installed herself, with considerable fanfare, in her favorite suite at the Bel Air Hotel.

That evening, she invited Sandi to dinner in her suite.

"Damion Tanner came to see me this afternoon," she said casually when they settled down to eat.

Much to her annoyance, Sandi felt her cheeks grow hot.

"Did he?" she said in a valiant attempt to sound casual. "How nice for you. Has his new movie gone into production yet?"

"I have no idea. I know the schedule of my own movie, and that is more than

enough."

"Did — um — did he say anything interesting when he was with you this afternoon?"

"Why, of course he did! What an odd question. Damion is a most entertaining conversationalist."

"Did he... did he say anything about me?" Sandi asked doggedly, feeling her face and neck flame with heat.

"I'm sure he must have," Gabriella remarked. "It would be odd if he visited me and did not mention your name. By the way, I have been asked to appear on Mark Kline's television program on Friday morning. You really must watch the show."

Sandi looked up, somewhat surprised by her mother's news. "You don't usually enjoy doing live television. Are you certain you'll be well enough?"

"I'm certain." Gabriella smiled again, looking uncommonly pleased with herself.

On Friday morning, Sandi sat down with a cup of coffee and flipped on the talk show, which she knew had been taped the night before.

Mark Kline's handsome features smiled into her living room. "We are fortunate to have a great actress and a world-renowned movie star with us this morning. Gabriella Barini has recently recovered from minor surgery and will be starting work on her latest movie next week." Mark Kline turned to his guest. "Tell us about your new movie," he said.

Gabriella flashed him one of her most dazzling smiles. "My new movie is very exciting," she said. "But this morning I am too happy to talk about my professional plans. Today I talk as a mother. You can imagine the pleasure I have in announcing that my dear daughter is about to be married."

"Married!" Mark Kline exclaimed.

Sandi sank down into the nearest arm-

chair. Somehow, looking at her mother's self-satisfied expression, she had a dreadful feeling that the worst was yet to come.

"Yes," Gabriella gave vent to a sentimental sigh. "My daughter is to marry Damion Tanner next week. They are very much in love, you understand."

Sandi jumped to her feet and began to yell wildly at her TV screen

"Have you gone crazy?" she screamed at her mother. "How could you do this to me? How could you be so *cruel*!"

The phone started to ring, but she made no attempt to pick it up. She didn't trust herself to be coherent, much less polite. She went into her bedroom and began furiously to dress for work.

It took her a while to realize that she was so angry with her mother because she wished so desperately that Gabriella's claims were true. She stood at the dressing table, paralyzed by an aching sensation of loss.

She heard the buzz of the doorbell but the last thing in the world she wanted at this moment was to entertain visitors.

The doorbell rang again. "Sandi, open this damn door! Right now!" Damion's voice thundered.

She swallowed hard, then walked to the door and opened it.

He strode into her living room, anger creating an almost visible aura around him. She wanted to be swept into his arms so badly that she could almost taste it.

"What the hell are you and Gabriella up to?" he demanded, pacing up and down the living room. "You refuse to see me or speak to me for days, and then I—along with a few million other people—suddenly hear that we're planning to get married. Did you even think of asking my opinion about all this?"

She turned away from him, forcing herself to feel anger. It was, she thought bleakly, slightly more dignified than bursting into tears and begging him to kiss

her.

"I'm not up to anything," she said tightly. "Do you think I *wanted* my mother to go on the air and make a stupid, ridiculous announcement like that?"

He stopped in midstride. "What's so ridiculous about it? Incredible as it may seem to you, there have been several women in my life who would have *liked* to marry me!"

"That doesn't seem incredible," she said cuttingly. "The movie industry is notorious for attracting masochists!"

They had been moving steadily closer, and now they stood only inches apart.

"Sandi," he said quietly, "please look at me."

In just a minute, if she didn't move, he would kiss her. Surely one kiss wouldn't matter too much. . .

They both jumped like startled rabbits when the doorbell buzzed, long and imperiously.

"It is I!" Gabriella proclaimed.

Sandi tore open the door, but before she could let loose a volley of outraged questions, Gabriella slipped past and floated into the living room.

"Dear boy," she said to Damion. "How fortunate that you are here already! We can make all our explanations together."

"I don't feel I have any explanations to make," Damion said, his voice exceptionally dry.

"Do you mean you have already told Sandi how much you love her? That is very good. Such an explanation will save us all a great deal of time."

For once in his life Damion seemed at a total loss for words. Sandi abandoned her effort to remain standing and sank bonelessly onto the sofa.

"Mother!" she said. "Damion and I would both like an explanation for the crazy announcement you made on Mark Kline's program. How could you possibly

do something so irresponsible?"

"There was nothing ridiculous about my announcement," she said tartly. "Even your father said it was an excellent plan. It has been plain to everybody that you and Damion are making yourselves hopelessly miserable by staying apart. However, you are both too stubborn to admit how you feel for each other, so we decided that I should bring you together again. Your father and I are both frantically busy, but we have set aside next Thursday to attend your wedding."

Damion looked searchingly at Gabriella. "Why do you think Sandi is in love with me?" he asked tersely.

"Because she is my daughter," Gabriella said. "But if you doubt my judgment, Damion, ask her yourself. Perhaps she will surprise you with her answer."

She walked gracefully toward the door.

Sandi jumped up from the sofa. "Mother, there isn't going to be a wedding! Damion and I have absolutely nothing in common. Nothing!"

"That is not quite what your father told me," Gabriella said. "And, like your father, I do not think you would go to bed with a man for whom you feel nothing."

A deathly silence filled the room, as Gabriella paused in the doorway.

"No, please, do not bother to show me out. You have so much to say to each other." She opened the front door with uncharacteristic briskness and let herself out, leaving Damion and Sandi alone in the living room, staring at each other in uncomfortable silence.

"Why wouldn't you see me?" Damion asked abruptly. "Why wouldn't you answer my calls? Dammit, Sandi, when we made love that night, didn't it mean anything to you?"

Too much, she thought. *Too dangerously much*. "Damion, I'm very attracted to you physically, but I'm scared to let our relationship develop any fur-

ther. You could hurt me very badly," she admitted huskily.

Long before she had finished speaking she was in his arms, her stomach pressed hard against him as his hands caressed her spine.

"How can you imagine that I would hurt you? Sweetheart, there's nothing in the world I want more than to love you."

"That's true in some ways, but not in others. Your profession comes first with you, Damion. It always has."

"Acting's important to me," he admitted. "Vitality important. But your work is important to you, too, so you should understand how I feel."

"You mean because we're both workaholics, somehow a long-term relationship between us is going to work out?"

"No," he said quietly. "But if you love me, we can find some way to cope with the demands of our careers."

"Damion, we're not just talking about two people with conflicting career schedules. I grew up taking second place to my parents' professions. I couldn't bear to take second place in your life as well." Her voice died away. "The problem is... I love you too much to play second fiddle to a script option."

He rocked her gently in his arms, then guided her over to the sofa and pulled her into his lap. "I know my behavior that night must have seemed pretty insensitive," he said quietly. "But I was feeling guilty as hell. In the first place it was extremely disconcerting to wake up and find myself eyeball to eyeball with your father. Secondly, the script he came to discuss had been sitting on my desk for ages, and I hadn't even glanced at the title page—chiefly because I'd been too damn busy mooning over you." He paused for a moment. "I love you, Sandi. It's never been like this for me with anybody else. Sometimes during the past week I thought I'd go crazy from wanting you."

Something painful that had spent a lifetime coiled deep and tight inside her suddenly snapped, and she gave a tiny sigh of liberation as she leaned her head against his chest.

"I love you, too, Damion," she said, feeling a rush of joy as she made the confession. "I just never knew that loving somebody would feel this...this *disorganized*."

Her body shook in his embrace, but she realized that it didn't matter if he sensed her passion or her confusion. With Damion she didn't have to mask her emotions. She didn't always have to be strong and calm and disciplined and in control. He loved her, and that meant that with him she could just be herself.

They made passionate love, right there and then on the sofa. She clung to him, moving with him from peak to peak until they finally soared to a climax that left them both dazed and shaking with joy.

Afterwards he held her in his arms for a long time. "I love you, Sandi," he said. "I wanted to say the words now, not when we were making love, so you'd know for sure I meant them."

"I love you, too," she said huskily.

"Good. So when are we getting married? Shall we please your parents by having the ceremony next Thursday?"

"Thursday seems like a terrific day for a wedding!"

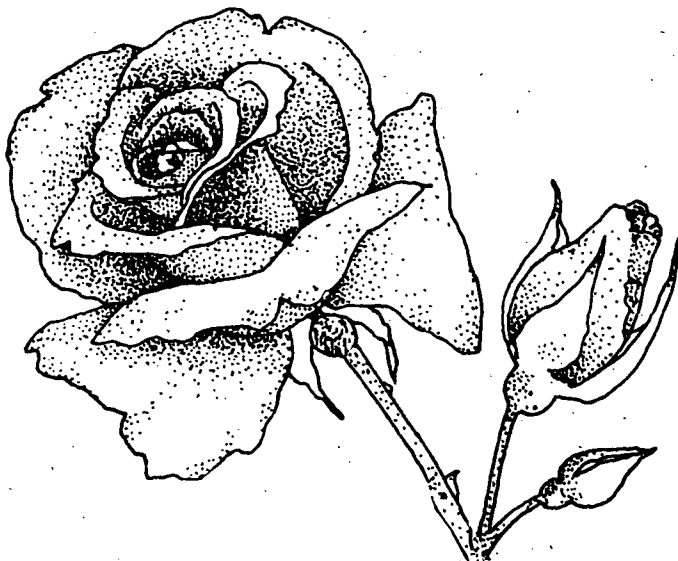
"My astrologer will be so relieved. He told me last week that Thursday would be the perfect day for our wedding."

She sat bolt upright in bed. "How did your astrologer know I'd agree to marry you?"

He chuckled. "Obviously our destiny must be written in the stars, so you'd better stop fighting it, honey."

He sealed her lips with a lingering, soul-searching kiss.

"Who's fighting?" she whispered, welcoming him into her arms. ♥



Brian's Captive

Investigative reporter Rowan Strickland planned to get the goods on playboy electronics wizard Brian Turner. But when Brian took her captive and carried her off to a remote, secluded island, she hoped he'd never let her go.

—ALEXIS HILL JORDAN—

Rowan Strickland angled her blue Chevette into a parking place between a sleek black Jaguar and a Lincoln Continental.

Wryly she eyed the two posh automobiles, and then swiveled her head to take in the long curved driveway lined with equally flashy transportation. The brick mansion dominating the head of the circular drive belonged to famed Washington hostess April Coster, whose socialite parties had become legendary over the past thirty

years. Though Rowan had attended similar high-powered gatherings with Charles, her former fiance, she'd never before been to a Coster extravaganza.

Her boss, Bill Emory, had wangled the invitation—a testimonial to his clout as one of the nation's most respected and feared political columnists. But now that he'd done his part, she had to follow through.

Rowan's stomach knotted as she checked the miniature tape recorder in her beaded handbag again. As the only girl in

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a family of rambunctious boys, she had learned early to force herself to take dares despite, and sometimes because of, her inner qualms. But the thing she was nerving herself to do now gave her more than the usual misgivings. She was here to get some information from a man who might well be dangerous. Though the gossip columns made Brian Turner sound like a harmless playboy, Bill had received a tip that linked him with some very questionable international business dealings. Specifically, that microchips manufactured by Turner Electronics had been found in the military equipment of hostile countries. Bill had heard that the Senate Committee on Foreign Trade was about to question Brian Turner about this, but Bill couldn't print the story without more information. Turner had refused to talk to Bill, so Rowan and her hidden tape recorder were to be the source.

It was her first big chance and she wouldn't have gotten it if Bill's recent heart attack hadn't forced him to delegate the legwork to his staff and if his star reporter, Wally Harding, hadn't been away on assignment. She just had to make good.

Rowan got out of the car and, taking a deep breath, walked resolutely up the drive and through the open front door. She paused just inside the threshold, taking in the crowded scene with interest. She could see into a large drawing room where elegantly clad guests clustered in little knots. Tuxedoed waiters circulated among the groups, bearing silver trays of champagne glasses and appealing canapes. The whole scene looked like something out of an elegant stage production. And Rowan suddenly felt as though she were an actress about to assume a role.

It was better to get right to the business at hand, she decided. Where was Brian Turner? Rowan wandered in a deliberately casual fashion from the drawing room

to the dining room with its delicate oriental wallpaper and pale green hangings, and then out onto the broad flagstone terrace lit with gay paper lanterns. Elegantly dressed partygoers studded the paths of the elaborate garden below, which sloped down to a spectacular overlook of Rock Creek Park. Sipping champagne, Rowan wove her way among them, heading for the shadows of a holly bower halfway down the gentle incline.

Brian Turner stood framed in the light spilling out from the French doors. From the protection of the greenery under which she stood, Rowan stared at him, taking in his darkly handsome features and rangy, narrow-hipped build. His photographs had not done him justice, she acknowledged, and suddenly, despite all her suspicions, she felt the undeniable tug of his sexual magnetism.

With studied casualness Rowan began to glide in her quarry's direction. For the moment he was alone, so the opportunity was perfect. Turning her head so that Brian Turner wouldn't know she was even aware of him, she stationed herself in the line of his gaze and reached down, pretending to remove a pebble from her sandal.

In the next minute she felt strong hands steady her shoulders. "Let me help you," a pleasantly deep voice offered politely.

Rowan looked up into the darkest pair of eyes she had ever encountered. They were like bottomless wells, and for an instant she felt as though she might drown in them.

"I hope you're willing to speak to strangers. But if not, I can ask our hostess for a formal introduction," he continued. "I'm Brian Turner."

"Rowan Strickland," she forced herself to return smoothly. "I trust April Coster's taste in guests implicitly." But it took all of her self-control to maintain her unruffled demeanor. Spreading through

her was a sudden sensation of heat.

"Does your foot hurt?" he asked with what sounded like real concern in his deep voice. "I've been told a pebble in the shoe can deliver a wallop out of all proportion to its size."

Pebble? Rowan thought blankly. And then she recalled her ruse with the shoe and nodded.

Turner smiled and waved an encompassing hand over the sweep of the garden. "Though I've always considered pebble paths charming, I've kept them out of my own landscaping and stuck to brick. But I do admire April's parterre," he added, referring to the elaborate pattern of hedges and paths below them. "I'm trying to do something similar on my own place in New Hampshire, but it will be a while before I can begin to rival this."

Rowan stared at him in astonishment. "You're interested in gardens?"

Turner chuckled in self-deprecation. "Yes, it was quite a struggle for me, choosing between engineering and landscape architecture. I like the outdoors so much I was tempted to go into garden design—on a grand scale. I wanted to turn the New Jersey cranberry bogs into another Central Park. Of course that was after my sea captain phase."

"Are you putting me on?" Rowan questioned.

He shook his head. "No, I'm doing my damndest to intrigue you."

Well, he was certainly succeeding, Rowan acknowledged to herself, returning his smile with a sparkling look. If she had met him under normal circumstances, she would have found it difficult not to fall under his spell. He was so outwardly appealing. *Back to business*, she told herself sternly. Bill wasn't interested in hearing about gardens or boyhood fantasies. "So, what career did you finally settle on?"

"Computer games," Brian answered. "I had to sublimate my yen for adventure somehow. And what do you do?" he inquired. His eyes were now looking down into hers with an unmistakable gleam of male interest.

"Why, I'm just another bureaucrat — with the Securities and Exchange Commission," she answered — the story she'd prepared. In a way, she was actually telling the truth, if one stretched the point a bit. "And things are pretty dull right now," she went on, remembering how bored she'd been just this afternoon with the reports from that agency. "I'd rather talk about you."

"Oh, the perfect Washington cocktail party companion," Brian returned, setting his glass down on the stone balustrade with casual grace and moving a step closer. "Well, the computer game business isn't all that interesting either."

Rowan looked at him with feigned disbelief. "But you're one of the men who've been pocketing all that money," she exclaimed. "The lunch hour crew in my office must drop enough silver in your mechanized bandits every month to set the Lone Ranger up for life."

Brian laughed appreciatively, the rich sound of his amusement seeming to linger in the warm night air like a promise. It was just then that out of the corner of her eye she spotted a tall, lanky figure watching her intently. Rowan stiffened. It was Paul Burton — Bill's newest assistant. Clearly her boss had sent him along to keep an eye out for her. Unconsciously Rowan's hands clenched, and her delicate nostrils flared with irritation.

"What's the matter?" Brian inquired in his resonant voice. "You've suddenly got a very odd expression on your face."

"I just saw someone I don't want to meet," Rowan volunteered.

"Oh?" Brian's eyes brightened, a smile lurking deep within them. "How about

getting out of here then? I can show you what our company is developing for the arcades, if you want."

That sounds promising, Rowan thought. She was determined now that having gone this far, no one was going to take this story away from her.

Still, as Brian Turner led her down the wide brick steps, away from the blazing lights of April Coster's party, she began to have second thoughts. But there was no opportunity to reconsider. All too quickly he was opening the door of a silver Bentley and dexterously settling her in its deep leather front seat. And then, in what seemed like minutes, the sleek automobile was pulling up under the canopy of the Wardman Park Hotel.

"My company keeps a suite of rooms in the residential wing here," Brian explained smoothly as a uniformed doorman approached the car.

The apartment was on an upper floor at the end of one wing. Rowan had expected the decor to resemble a plush corporate headquarters, so she wasn't prepared for the elaborate jumble of antique oddities haphazardly scattered around the living room.

"Are you also in the antique business?" she grinned.

Brian shook his head. "While I'm down here, I like to take in the local auctions. I'm furnishing my house in New Hampshire, and I want it to be something special. Now what would you like to drink?" he asked.

"Gin and tonic," she answered absently.

"Whatever you want is yours," he returned lightly.

If he only knew what she really wanted, he wouldn't have said that, Rowan thought. Suddenly more unsure of herself than ever, she poked her head around the corner into the dining room. There

another incongruity awaited her. All the usual furniture had been removed and replaced with five brightly lit arcade games.

Rowan glided toward one of the games, glad of another focus for her thoughts. This might be the opening she was looking for. Maybe if she was enthusiastic about his business, he'd talk about it.

"Go ahead and try one," Brian offered in his smoky voice. "You won't need any quarters."

Rowan was a natural player. But the combination of champagne and nervousness did nothing for her coordination. She ended the first round with only seventy points to her credit.

Brian watched her performance impassively and then, at her suggestion, tried a round himself.

"You really *can* play," Rowan applauded as she watched.

He sent her a sidelong glance, his dark eyes gazing at her with warm invitation. "I get a lot of practice," he admitted. "And I did invent the game."

"Uh, what makes it work?" Rowan asked abruptly.

"Computer chips. You know, those tiny pieces of silicon that are taking over the world."

"Well, they must be pretty sophisticated," Rowan prompted. "Are they the same kind of chips that they're putting in the new cars to tell you when you need the transmission overhauled?"

"Similar," he conceded, turning toward the bar and handing her one of the two drinks he'd mixed.

"How did you get into the business anyway?" she asked huskily, firmly back in her role of female sleuth.

"Oh, I was lucky enough to see the possibilities of these chips and get in on the ground floor," Brian replied, turning to her with another one of his entrancing smiles. "I'm good at seeing possibilities," he added smoothly.

"Well, did you ever think about using your chips in anything except games?" she hurried on.

His face clouded. "Never," he retorted, in a suddenly less forthcoming tone. She had obviously pressed too far. But the tension of the moment was mercifully broken by the ringing of the telephone.

"Would you excuse me," he asked, turning toward the hall. "I don't want to bore you with business."

Tensely Rowan listened to his footsteps stride down the long hall and then the click of a door as he closed it firmly behind him. Opening her purse, she flipped the On button of the tiny tape recorder inside and walked back into the living room.

Her questing gaze swept the room taking in the odd assortment of antiques once again. And then as she focused on the desk, a new idea took hold. It was obviously not a recent acquisition. Maybe the drawers held some useful information. Keeping one ear cocked for Brian, Rowan bent toward the desk drawers. Sliding the middle one open, she noticed several neat stacks of paper. The fourth stack her trembling fingers riffled through yielded pay dirt. In the middle was a green slip of paper labeled, "Confidential Memo."

Rowan inhaled sharply as she scanned the message. "Personnel reporting on strategies to deal with the Senate investigation will meet at the Indian Princess, 28 June, 1730 hours." Elation surged through her. This was exactly the kind of thing she had been hoping for.

Rowan had less than a minute to memorize the words, for as she was replacing the green sheet in the desk, she heard a door click open. Her heart beating inside her chest like a frenzied drum, she quietly slid the desk drawer closed and scurried across the carpet to the bar. Turning her back, she reached for

the gin bottle.

"I was just freshening my drink," she explained untruthfully.

Brian paused, giving her a doubtful look. "I wouldn't have pegged you for a drinker," he remarked, frowning slightly. Realizing that she needed to distract him quickly, Rowan leaned forward, conscious of the view her low-cut dress must be giving him. His eyes gleamed as his gaze dropped to the swelling whiteness of her cleavage. "There *are* more intoxicating things than liquor, you know," she whispered throatily, setting her glass gently on the bar.

Brian responded as she had instinctively known he would. Crossing the room with swift purpose, he pulled her into his arms. Rowan felt the brush of his lips on her forehead and the touch of a warm hand on the flesh above the low-cut back of her cocktail dress.

"The moment I saw you looking so damned enticing on the patio, I knew we were going to wind up in each other's arms," he murmured gruffly. "We're going to be very, very fine together, Rowan," he added on a more urgent note. And then his lips covered hers.

Automatically she yielded the warm sweetness of her mouth to his sensuous exploration. As his lips and tongue fathomed hers, Rowan's senses were enveloped by a feeling like dark velvet. The hint of whiskey on his breath and the spicy scent of his after-shave seemed to whisper seductively inside her head.

Brian's lips were exploring the line of her jaw now, dropping fiery little kisses that seemed to sear her skin.

"I've been wanting to do that since the moment I saw you at April's," he murmured.

"Yes," she breathed, her ability to think clearly almost totally obliterated. But his next words revived her defense systems.

"I think we'll be more comfortable in the bedroom," he said huskily.

To her shock Rowan found herself seriously considering the idea. She would be fulfilling her own needs as well as doing the job she had set out to accomplish. But her scruples quickly vanquished that temptation.

Looking up at him through a thick screen of eyelashes, she whispered, "I couldn't sleep with a man I know so little about." The new role she had chosen was Little Miss Prim. But it seemed like the only course open at this point.

Brian sighed and then, taking her hand firmly in his, led her to the couch. "All right," he agreed resignedly. "Let's sit down and do some communicating. Exactly what else do you want to know about me?" As he asked, his fingers reached out to toy with a strand of her bright hair, and then he leaned over to bring it slowly to his lips. Somehow the gesture was explosively seductive. Sternly Rowan had to remind herself of her purpose.

"Well, are you in Washington on business, and how long do you plan to stay?" she began.

Brian's mouth curved in a smile. "Long enough," he parried. And then he whispered huskily, "Right now you're a very good reason for staying around." Leaning forward, he slipped an arm behind her back, and with his other hand pressed to her shoulder he began to lower her down onto the watered-silk cushions. Despite her earlier show of resolve, this motion succeeded in sweeping away Rowan's power to resist, and she sighed weakly as his lips came down on hers again.

Lifting his head, he looked down at her flushed face. "Whatever you might think, I'm not in the habit of doing this sort of thing with women I barely know."

Somehow Rowan found this informa-

tion pleasing. "Neither am I," she whispered.

"Then you must have felt the same attraction for me that I did for you," Brian persisted.

"Yes," Rowan breathed, realizing as she spoke that it was not a lie. What she felt for this man went far beyond anything she had experienced before — even with Charles.

The relief in his eyes moved her strangely. And she felt a stab of pain as she recalled her hidden motives. But he gave her no chance to dwell on the emotion, because in the next second his questing mouth was on hers again and she met his kiss eagerly, her tongue entwining lithely with his to increase their mutual pleasure. With burning anticipation she felt his hand traveling up to the low neckline of her jersey dress.

"You're one of the loveliest women I've ever seen," he whispered, "and I want so much to touch you all over." With infinite care he began to slip the top of her dress down from her pale shoulders. "You want me. Admit it," Brian growled. And it was all true. She did want him now, and somehow nothing else seemed important. All the other considerations of the evening had been swept away.

Rowan opened her eyes, their blue darkened with her own passion. There was a high squealing noise at the edge of her awareness, but she was too caught up in the intense sensation of the moment to pay it any heed.

However, Brian Turner was apparently not quite so insensible. Slowly his head turned toward the origin of the sound. And then his body went even more rigid. In an instant he had levered himself off the couch and snatched her beaded purse from the table. The abrupt motion jarred Rowan from her trance, and she went cold with horror as she realized what the

sound had to be. Her tape recorder! It must be malfunctioning.

This dreadful possibility was instantly confirmed as Brian jerked open the purse and extracted the small machine. With one economical movement he snapped the fragile machine in half, effectively cutting off its tinny screech.

"As you can see, it's dangerous to rely on inferior equipment," he drawled in a voice that dripped with icicles. And then his fingers casually released the crushed pieces of plastic that had been her recorder. Rowan watched them scatter on the rug like a child's broken toy. She took a shuddering breath as she watched him calmly going through the contents of her purse. He had already removed her pearl-trimmed comb and matching lipstick case and was now opening her wallet with a maddening air of placid curiosity. In a moment he had extracted her press card and, shooting her an icy look, began to read it aloud. "This certifies that Rowan Strickland is a member of the William R. Emory News Group." Brian's eyes slitted, and he turned toward her, holding the card now between thumb and forefinger as though it were trash he was reluctant to touch. "So you work for that scandalmonger! After I refused to talk to him this afternoon, I suppose I should have guessed he would try something underhanded."

Rowan leaped to Bill's defense. "This wasn't his idea at all; in fact—I was the one who talked him into it," she blurted. But the flash of disgust in Brian's eyes made her wish she could call the hasty words back.

"You talked him into it?" he repeated slowly. "My God, what kind of female barracuda are you? Do you make a practice of selling your body for scraps of dirty Washington gossip?" He took a menacing step toward her, and Rowan instinctively shrank back against the couch.

The last thing Rowan expected was Brian's next action. His eyes never leaving her face, he slipped his dinner jacket off and tossed it over the back of a nearby chair. "I would have sworn you were really responding to my lovemaking. Either I'm a fool or you're one hell of an actress. Let's replay it again and see, shall we?"

In one lithe motion he was beside her on the couch again, shoving her back into the cushions. Horrified, Rowan began to push at his chest and opened her mouth to protest. But that only gave him the opportunity to fasten his lips on hers and thrust a punitive tongue between her teeth. At the same time she felt his hips grinding insistently against hers while his hands went once more to the shoulders of her jersey dress. Real fear shot through Rowan. She began to struggle in earnest. But her feeble efforts were useless. Clamping her wrists together with one sinewy hand, he raised his body slightly and stared down at her.

"You've been sending lying little signals all evening," he ground out. "It's time you learned that eventually you have to make good on promises. And now I'm going to collect on what's owed me."

Rowan's bravado had totally evaporated. Despite herself, her lower lip began to quiver, and as Brian glared down at her, she felt tears welling in her eyes. And then one leaked out and trickled down her cheek. Brian watched its progress with an expression of disgust.

"You're just full of tricks, aren't you?" he snarled.

But Rowan was incapable of answering. More tears trickled down her face, and she was powerless to stop them. They weren't just inspired by fear, but also by a profound sense of loss that she was not at the moment able to acknowledge.

Brian made a rough noise of disgust in his throat and then abruptly released her hands. She felt the weight of his body

leave hers, and in a moment he was standing in front of the couch with his back to her.

"Get the hell out of here before I change my mind," he growled under his breath.

Rowan stared up at his tense shoulders in disbelief. And then, as his muttered words penetrated her brain, she hastily obeyed. When her dress had been set to right, she stood up, swept the contents of her evening bag back inside and then ran for the door. Minutes later she was downstairs in the lobby, tipping the doorman after he had hailed her a cab.

The cab sped back to her apartment in Chevy Chase with Rowan in a state of shock. Unable to think clearly, she paid the driver and fled to the safety of her apartment. The phone was ringing as she entered. It was Bill.

"I was worried about you," his gruff voice complained. "Paul told me that you skipped out of that party with Turner. What happened? Are you all right?"

Touched by his anxiety, Rowan took the receiver away from her ear and looked down at it. Was she all right? She was going to have to be. Her hand clamped the receiver so hard that her knuckles turned white. Yet, when she brought it back to her mouth, she managed to speak firmly. Briefly she told Bill about the information she had gleaned from the evening's fiasco. His elation made her stomach knot. And she was glad that he couldn't see her stricken face. Pleading exhaustion, she ended the conversation quickly, promising a fuller report in the morning.

The insistent twitter of her alarm clock brought Rowan awake with a start. Groaning she shut it off. Her first instinct was to pull the covers over her head. But the more pragmatic side of her nature wouldn't let her.

To bolster her mood she allowed her-

self a long luxurious shower. Afterwards she pulled a bright flowered summer dress from her closet and slipped into a pair of beige slingbacks before hailing a cab to April Coster's. There she picked up her car and then proceeded to the office to make a series of phone calls. By the time Bill slouched in, she knew that the *Indian Princess* was a large cruising sailboat registered in the name of Brian Turner and docked at the marina on Maine Avenue. Her boss's reaction was gleeful. "I'll get Paul to plant a bug on that boat," he crowed.

Rowan spent most of the morning listening to Bill and Paul making arrangements for the covert operation. She was fervently thankful that her only part in the operation would be to drive Paul to the wharf and keep lookout while he stole on board to conceal the recording equipment.

And so, that afternoon she found herself waiting in her car at the fish market parking lot, sniffing the rich variety of odors brought out by the hot July sun while Paul took a circuitous route to the marina through a nearby junkyard.

In her mind's eye she was just seeing Paul sneaking below deck when his voice in her ear made her jerk her head around with surprise. He was leaning against the car with his head at the window.

"I hate to tell you this, Rowan, but you're going to have to take over."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, staring at him open-mouthed. "What's wrong?"

"Just my rotten luck," he moaned with pain. "this is the first really big assignment Bill's given me, and I've just muffed it. I was almost through the yard when a rusty nail in a two-by-four got me. I stepped right on it." He gave Rowan a pitiful look. "I can hardly walk, Row, and I'm afraid what happens next is up to you."

Twenty minutes later Rowan was

standing on a narrow wooden finger pier looking at the three feet of oily water that separated her from the teak deck of Brian Turner's beautiful vintage yawl. She'd never make it across with high heels on, she mused, ruefully imagining herself floundering in the less than pristine water of the Potomac. Slipping off her sandals, she looked around for somewhere to stow them. Nearby was a large wooden storage locker bolted to the dock. Its padlock hung open. Quickly she lifted the lid and tucked the sandals under a pile of life preservers. Then she turned back to the boat and tugged on one of the lines mooring it to the pier.

"Oh, well, here goes nothing," she said aloud now. Tensing her muscles, she flung herself across the chasm and landed neatly on the sun-heated wooden deck.

Planting the first bug on the far side of the hull just under the rub rail was easy. But the next one would have to go inside. Her heart sank when she tried the key Paul had given her on the main cabin hatch and found it didn't fit. How was she going to get into the cabin? Nervously she began to make her way along the narrow walkway. On the other side of the cabin there was a forward hatch held secure by another padlock. Gingerly she inserted the key and gave the padlock a yank. Thankfully it slipped open in her hand.

For a moment she stared at the padlock in relief. And then, anxious to gain the shelter of the craft's interior, she opened the small door and lowered herself through it.

She found herself in a small forward compartment full of white Dacron sail bags. Would this be a safe spot to hide the bug, she wondered a little desperately, or should she move aft toward the main cabin? That seemed like the better idea, and so she opened a small door and crept out into the craft's luxurious galley and dining area. It took her a few moments to decide

on a spot, but she finally settled for the underside of a lower kitchen cabinet. She had just crawled back into the sail storage area and closed the door preparatory to making her escape, when she felt the boat sway under the impact of someone's weight.

Footsteps made a slow progress along the deck and paused just over her head. Rowan stared up in terror when she heard a metallic click just above her head. My God, the padlock, she thought. Somebody had snapped it shut, locking her into this tiny prison.

Brian Turner climbed back onto the dock wondering whether one of Bill Emory's meddling crew could be inside. It was certainly possible. After last night's ugly scene with Rowan, he had changed the time for the meeting, realizing that she could have discovered the memo. She could even be on board. Now he regretted his loss of self-control. But she had tricked him and hurt him and he'd reacted emotionally. How could he have been so wrong about her? He pondered this as he paced up and down the dock.

Ten minutes later three grim-faced men in business suits joined him. After they had shaken hands all around, Brian made a cautionary gesture and then drew them a few paces further from the boat.

"I'm afraid we may have unwanted company," he explained in answer to their puzzled expressions. "We can't meet on the *Indian Princess* as planned. We'll have to hold our conference here on the dock."

Rowan, who for the past hot and sweaty hour had been wishing fervently for a cool breeze and an iced drink, would have gladly endured another day in the ovenlike cabin to hear what Brian Turner and his cohorts were saying. But all that filtered through to her were low-pitched

murmurs.

She was in deep trouble. And very likely there was going to be a reckoning. Would it be like what had happened between her and her former fiancé Charles not so very long ago?

Looking back, Rowan realized that Charles had seen her as an asset — the right wife to enhance his Washington career. On his part there could have been few genuine feelings. But he had scarcely given her time to think. Overwhelmed and flattered by his adroit and persistent attentions, she had thought herself in love with him and accepted his engagement ring. Only a few weeks later, however, her pink cloud had turned brown at the edges when the *Washington Post* had broken an extensive GSA contract-peddling scheme. A group of suppliers had connived with the middle-level officials to sell the huge government purchasing agency substandard materials at inflated prices. And Charles had been part-owner of one of those companies.

Though Brian Turner had accused her of being immoral, in fact, she was very principled and was truly shocked by her fiancé's hidden breach of ethics and illegal source of income. She had confronted him with the article immediately. But he only sneered at her moral outrage and ridiculed her shock.

Rowan had broken the engagement immediately. And had promised herself that in future she would be much more cautious about getting seriously involved with a man.

At that moment the boat swayed again under someone's weight and she realized that the murmur of voices had stopped. Tensing, she listened as footsteps circled the deck. But they seemed to be avoiding her hatch cover. What was going on now, she asked herself, as she heard several small thuds. And then her heart seemed to lurch into her mouth as her ears caught

the metallic grinding of a starter motor. A powerful diesel roared to life and the boat shuddered. *My God*, Rowan thought hysterically, *he's starting it up! What am I going to do?* But there was nothing she could do, nothing but wait in spiraling terror as she felt the large boat begin to move out of its berth and then pick up speed as it headed into the channel and out into Chesapeake Bay.

It was hours later, as dusk began to quench some of the light filtering through the small Plexiglass porthole, that the engines suddenly cut out and the heavy splash and the rattle of chain told her the boat was being anchored.

As if on cue, the cockpit hatch was pushed back and then the sound of a horribly familiar masculine voice seemed to bounce off the walls of the enclosed space below.

"Don't you think it's time you let me know you've made yourself my guest?"

The boat rocked slightly with Brian's weight as he jumped lithely down through the open hatch. The door between the two compartments was thrown open. Instinctively Rowan shrank back, pressing herself against the wood paneling, but the movement was wasted effort. A sinewy brown hand reached out and handcuffed her wrist. In the next moment she was dragged without ceremony into the main cabin.

"Just what the hell are you doing on my boat? Did that aging snoop you work for put you up to this?"

She swallowed, then blurted, "Yes, it was Bill's idea." Though she was determined not to show weakness, her eyes skittered away from his. "I'd found out you were having a meeting, and he hoped to learn what it was about."

The information did nothing to cool Brian's temper. "Don't tell me you've got another malfunctioning tape recorder

hidden on you," he growled. "No, it wouldn't be tape recorders." He gave her a glittering look of comprehension, and her heart once more flew into her throat. "You've been planting microphones, haven't you?"

Rowan averted her eyes as she felt the dark red color sweep into her cheeks.

"How many?" Brian demanded tersely.

When she didn't immediately reply, he shook her until her curls bobbed like tiny yo-yos. "Answer me!"

"Two..." Rowan got out between chattering teeth.

Mercifully he relaxed his hold somewhat. "And where did you put them?"

Before she could stop herself, her guilty eyes went to the cabinets below the tiny stainless steel sink. At that moment Brian shot her a narrow-eyed look that intercepted the direction of her glance. Instantly he was examining the cabinets closely. With a grunt of satisfaction he yanked the bug from the underside where she had placed it, looked at it with disgust, and then dropped the offending object on the floor and ground it mercilessly beneath his heel.

Turning back to Rowan, he placed his lips close to her ear. "And now for the other one. I bet it's outside," he hissed. He once more pinioned her wrist in his strong grip and dragged her stumbling like a recalcitrant child up the companion-way and into the cockpit.

Brian drummed his fingers menacingly on the teak hatch cover. "Are you going to tell me where it is, or do I have to shake it out of you again?"

Dispiritedly Rowan pointed at the rub rail. "It's over there."

Once there Brian quickly found it. He leaned back on his haunches and gave Rowan a glinting look of triumph. Holding the mike up to his mouth, he spoke directly into it.

"I hope you're listening Bill," he began, speaking calmly and deliberately. "Because this is to inform you that your busy little assistant is going on vacation. She won't be harmed, and if you say anything to the police, I will tell them that you illegally bugged my boat and gained illegal entry."

With a look of satisfaction Brian held the bug out at arm's length and then flipped it casually over the side. "From here on out, your big-eared employer can listen in on the jellyfish."

Rowan's frantic gaze followed the arc of the small microphone. It was her last hope of immediate rescue.

"What did you mean, 'going on vacation'?" she demanded.

"I intend to disappear for a couple of weeks. I don't intend going before that Senate committee until I'm good and ready. I'd expected to be lonely on this little retreat. But now," he purred with suggestive male satisfaction, "I'm going to have company."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Rowan sputtered.

"From here on out, you're going to do exactly as I say," Brian growled and took a menacing step toward her.

Rowan panicked. Turning blindly, she jumped up on the bench, stumbled against a wire shroud and, arms flailing wildly, fell over board with a resounding splat—right into a floating mass of stinging jellyfish.

Rowan had been badly stung once before and was terrified of the creatures. As she felt their needlelike assaults on her arms and legs, she began to scream and, thrashing wildly, sank beneath the water. But as she surfaced, Brian was beside her.

"Relax," he commanded as he got her into a life-saving carry. Brian stroked quickly back to the boat and curled Rowan's stiff fingers around the anchor line. He hoisted himself over the stern,

then reached down and hauled her, exhausted and trembling, into the cockpit.

"Come on," he said gently, gazing at the fiery trail of jellyfish stings along her arms. "I've got something that will help."

Too weak to protest, Rowan let him guide her back down into the cabin. He disappeared for a moment and returned with a white beach towel and a can of meat tenderizer.

"Get out of that wet dress. You can wrap up in this," he said firmly, handing her the towel. As Brian turned his back and began to mix a paste at the small galley sink, Rowan did as she was told.

"You'll have to lie down if I'm going to do this properly," he told her, indicating a V-shaped berth through the open companionway. It was the same one she'd occupied earlier in the day, only now the sail bags had been stowed in a locker and the bed was clean and inviting underneath the open hatch that now showed the evening sky.

Walking with all the erect dignity she could muster so as not to disturb the precarious arrangement of her towel, Rowan crossed in front of him. Once through the narrow doorway, she carefully arranged herself on the blue and white striped mattress.

Slowly, caressingly Brian's hands traveled over her aching body, delicately applying the soothing paste. The pain from her wounds began to subside, but wherever he touched her, new trails of a very different fire began to lick along her nerve paths. The sexual tension between them now was a tangible thing. To dissipate it, she swallowed hard and searched her mind for some neutral remark to drop into the charged silence.

"How does that stuff work?" she asked huskily.

Brian's hand was on her calf. It paused for a moment on the smooth skin. "The nettles emit a protein poison. The

tenderizer helps break it down."

His voice too was thick as his hand continued its downward stroking motion.

When he finally finished, he said: "Would you like something to eat or drink? There isn't much on board, but I could rustle up a sandwich and a cup of tea. And there's some brandy. I should have thought of it earlier. Would you like an inch or two of that?"

Rowan turned her head toward him. "No to everything but the tea. That sounds wonderful."

Brian left her side and disappeared through the small door, reemerging a few minutes later with a small cup of steaming liquid. Levering herself up carefully on one elbow, Rowan accepted the drink gratefully. But when it was at her lips, she paused. "How do I know this isn't drugged or poisoned?"

Brian's eyebrows began to rise slowly and a flush started across his high cheekbones. He had, in fact, put a sleeping pill in her tea.

"Okay, okay," Rowan said placatingly and then downed the amber fluid in several hasty gulps to show her good faith. The tea had a pungent flavor that burned a path down her gullet to her stomach. She fell back on the mattress with her eyes closed and one hand on her throat while the other still clutched at the folds of her towel.

"I'm so tired," she muttered, already feeling the warmth of the drink spreading through her veins.

Brian chuckled as he watched her closely. She was a lovely thing lying there with her lowered eyelashes sweeping her cheek and her curls a bright nimbus on the pillow.

"Do you want to sleep now?"

She nodded and sighed. "Yes."

Quietly he clicked off the small light on the wall and turned to leave.

Rowan's restless sleep was invaded by a

high-pitched buzz that built into a metallic roar. Through the porthole next to her head, she could see a small yellow seaplane slushing to a stop less than fifty yards from the *Indian Princess*. Abruptly, all the details of yesterday's catastrophe chased one another through her memory like a cartoon misadventure. However the sound of approaching footsteps brought her quickly back to the unfunny reality of her situation.

Brian's tanned face and windblown thatch of dark hair appeared in the open hatch. "Don't be shy. Get dressed and come on up and meet Hank," he invited with a wicked grin. "He's going to be flying us to our vacation paradise."

Rowan's jaw dropped open. "Vacation what?" she questioned, her voice rising in a small shriek.

"An island hideaway just for the two of us," he explained with great satisfaction. "All my stowaways get very special treatment. At least the cute, red-headed ones do."

Outrage propelled her out of bed, into her clothes, then up the stairs and through the hatch to the deck. But once there, she found herself standing between two grinning and highly amused males.

"I want it on the record that I am being held prisoner by this man." She gestured at Brian, who was grinning broadly. "And that I am not going willingly anywhere he takes me."

The two men exchanged glances. And then Hank shrugged and offered in a sober tone, "I'm sorry, but I take my orders from Brian here. I know that if he's in charge, you won't be harmed in any way."

She had no choice but to watch helplessly as Brian and Hank transferred a few boxes of supplies to the plane. In a matter of minutes Brian was guiding her firmly onto the wing and helping her inside. He strapped her into the passenger's seat and

handed her a container of hot black coffee and a roll. Sulkily refusing to thank him, she looked away. But he only whispered "Happy landings" in her ear and moved forward into the co-pilot's seat. Dejectedly, Rowan stared out the window and began to listen in on the men's conversation.

"I've made arrangements for George to pick up the boat and return it to its slip," Brian was saying to the pilot. "I don't want anyone to know where I am until we've turned up some more information about those chips. But I'll stay in touch. There's a ham set on the island."

Rowan's ears pricked up at that. She knew how to use a two-way radio. A set on the island meant she had a chance for escape. The thought cheered her somewhat.

Gradually the monotonous drone of the engine, combined with emotional and physical exhaustion, began to do its work. Rowan slumped sideways against the window frame into an uneasy sleep.

It was a shift in the engine's sound that jarrd her awake hours later. They were coming down over sparkling blue water dotted with tiny, pine-covered islands.

The plane landed on the water and began taxiing toward the shore of a nearby island. Were they on a lake? she wondered, trying to fix a map of the northern U.S. in her mind. They were obviously quite far north. Maybe they had crossed over into Canada. Yes, that made more sense. If Brian were avoiding a Senate investigating committee, he would want to leave the country.

The transfer of people and supplies from the plane to the island was accomplished quickly. By the time the sun was directly overhead, Rowan was standing on the deserted shoreline watching in helpless frustration as Hank's yellow seaplane took off from the water, circled the

island to dip a wing, and then slowly diminished against the cloudless sky. When she could no longer hear the drone of its engine, Rowan turned an accusing face to the tall, dark-haired man standing at her side.

"Don't you think you'd better tell me what's going on?" she challenged. But to her chagrin the words came out with a quaver.

Brian answered with a lazy smile. "All in good time. Let's go and inspect our quarters." Seizing her elbow, he began to propel her toward a log cabin partially hidden among a thick stand of pines and sumacs.

"All the comforts," he remarked, unlocking the door and striding into a homey-looking living room furnished with sturdy colonial-style furniture. A huge natural stone fireplace dominated one end of the room, and a colorful rag rug covered the wide pine-planked floor. "Want something more to eat?" he asked cheerfully. "I can offer you eggs and bacon — even a steak if you're really hungry."

Rowan remained in the doorway, staring at him wordlessly. The sheer gall of the man was taking her breath away. "I demand to know just what my situation is," she clipped out harshly.

"Your situation is as follows: You are my guest on this delightful uninhabited island until such time as I see fit to return you to your usual nefarious activities in the nation's capital. Since you have no choice in the matter, I suggest you relax and enjoy yourself. And the first thing you should do is wipe that unattractive scowl off your very pretty face and get out of that ruined dress. Now why don't I see if I can find you something to wear. Have to keep things proper around here, you know. In fact," he threw over his shoulder as he disappeared into a short hall off the living room, "I'll even let you have the

master bedroom. Can't say I'm not the perfect host." In a minute Brian emerged from the bedroom grinning and holding aloft a pair of cutoffs and a T-shirt that bore the legend "Canada Geese Do It Higher."

"The owner of this place is an ornithologist," he explained, tossing the clothing in her direction.

"And just whose cabin is this?" she asked guilelessly as she neatly caught and clutched the shorts and T-shirt against her chest. If he would reveal the name, she would have something concrete to send over the radio.

But Brian was maddeningly cagey. "Just an old school pal," he drawled. "Now I have a great idea. How about taking a lovely, cool swim before you change your clothes? You can swim in absolute privacy down at the cove. I won't peek. After all I've already seen most of you," he pointed out with graceless logic.

Five minutes later she was retracing her steps to the beach, a green towel around her shoulders and the T-shirt and cutoffs over her slender arm. She walked out to the end of the dock, stripped off the dress and bra and dove in, turning over on her back to float effortlessly for a few minutes on the surface, her hair haloing out around her on the water like fiery leaves framing a delicate white water lily.

Rowan was in that vulnerable and revealing position when the sound of heavy steps on the dock made her body jackknife.

"What — what are you doing here?" Rowan sputtered. "You promised me complete privacy."

"Tsk, tsks," Brian countered. "A seasoned cloak-and-dagger type like you ought to know better than to trust the enemy." Brian shot her a boyishly guileless smile. "Besides, I've brought you lunch." He gestured to the plate beside him, which held a sandwich and an

apple. "So the least you can do is let me have a little fun for my efforts."

"You get out of here or I'll stay in the water all night," Rowan glared up at him.

"You really mean that, don't you?" Brian smiled down at her. Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned and sauntered away while Rowan fumed.

However, her anger began to cool after she had climbed onto the dock, towed herself dry and dressed in the oversized clothes Brian had provided. Her instincts told her that she was safe with Brian, at least as safe as she wanted to be. And *that* was really the problem.

Rowan sat on the dock and ate her sandwich. In no hurry to return to Brian, she decided to explore the shoreline. Perhaps she could discover where the island was. She walked for a long time, but there were no clues, not even a passing boat. She was about to give up when she saw a radio antenna just behind a rise. Heading in its direction, she found a faint trail and followed it up a rocky slope to a small clearing that held a shed with an outside generator. The antenna was on the roof.

She ran to the door and tried it, but it was securely locked—as was the shuttered window. Rowan headed back to the cabin thinking that all she had to do now was to trick Brian into revealing their location, to somehow get the key to the shed and then to get a message out to Bill. But somehow the idea of rescue didn't make her as happy as it had that morning.

That night they had a simple dinner from their ample store of provisions and retired early to their separate rooms. During the days that followed, they explored their private paradise, Brian's easygoing, nonthreatening demeanor setting the tone. Randomly he led Rowan around the island, stopping often to comment upon the flora. During these treks, she learned to respect the breadth of his knowledge—

and his obvious pleasure in the natural setting. This was a very different man from the Brian Turner she had met at a Washington cocktail party and who had discovered her on his boat. This was a man who could be a friend and companion. She already knew he could be a lover. In fact, only the knowledge that he wanted to be her lover marred the tranquil perfection of their first days together. In all their dealings the attraction between them hummed like unseen electricity. And at the end of each idyllic sunset the voltage seemed to build.

After dinner on the evening of their third day, as they sat quietly in front of the fire enjoying the chocolate brownies Rowan had made for desert, Brian asked suddenly and unexpectedly out of the darkness, "Rowan, have you ever been in love?"

If she had been able to see Brian, she most probably would not have answered. But, enveloped in her cocoon of darkness, she heard herself answering, "Yes. I was."

"Was?"

"It's all over now."

"Want to tell me what happened?" he prompted gently.

And Rowan realized that she did. Haltingly at first, and then with more assurance, she began to tell him about Charles Fogel, the man she thought she wanted to marry until she learned of his involvement in the GSA contract-peddling scheme.

When at last she had spun out the whole story, she felt immensely better, as though she had been holding some guilty secret inside and had finally let it go.

With a start she heard the scrape of a chair. Suddenly, Brian was standing in front of her, pulling her to her feet with strong, viselike hands. In the dark she felt his grip tighten on her shoulders. Alarmed, she tried to twist away, but he held her fast.

"So, you've been punishing me for Charles Fogel all this time," he rasped. "Well, I'm not like him, whatever you may think."

"What — what do you mean?" she quavered.

"I mean, you've been assuming that because Charles was involved in something crooked, I am too. Well, I won't be mistaken for another man. Before the evening's over, you're going to be very aware that you're with Brian Turner, not Charles Fogel." And with that his lips descended to take possession of hers while his hands slipped from her shoulders to her back and hips. Rowan felt her body pulled firmly against the length of Brian's. There was no doubt in her mind who the man was that held her in his arms. All the sexual tension that had been smoldering between the two of them suddenly came crackling to life.

The raw force of her reaction was both exciting and frightening. Suddenly overwhelmed and confused, Rowan took Brian by surprise. Pulling away quickly, she fled across the room and out the door of the cabin.

Ahead of her Rowan could see the water glistening faintly beyond the trees. But she never reached the edge of the pines. On feet silent as an Indian brave's tracking a deer, Brian was suddenly at her side, his broad hand on her shoulder. This time, to Rowan's sudden delight and relief, he was not about to let his quarry escape. With one fluid motion he swung her up into his sinewy arms and pulled her body against his broad chest. And then he was striding with her back toward the open cabin door, just visible in the glow from the fireplace.

In the darkness Rowan did not know which room he had chosen as she felt herself being lowered gently onto a broad bed and felt Brian stretch the length of his hard body beside hers. As Rowan felt the

contact of his muscular chest against her breasts and his lithe hips against hers, her breath quickened. She was truly his captive now, not through physical restraint but through her own overwhelming desire.

"Rowan," she heard him whisper, his breath warm against her ear, "why did you run from me?"

"I was afraid," she admitted in a small voice.

"And now?"

"Now there's only one thing that matters."

"Yes," he agreed.

The clouds had rolled away from the face of the moon, and a silvery radiance was streaming in through the uncurtained window. Rowan watched as Brian gently pulled her to a sitting position on the bed. And then his hands found the edge of her T-shirt. Raising her arms above her head, she made it easy for him to remove the garment. In a moment her bra had followed it to the rug beside the bed.

"My God, you're beautiful," he breathed as he finished undressing her.

In the next instant she felt him move away, and her eyes snapped open in surprise before she realized that he was only removing his clothing.

This time when he pulled her against the length of his body, there was no barrier to their intimacy. Neither could get enough of the other now.

Desire made her bold. "Don't make me wait," she implored. And he was quick to comply. Rowan marveled at the perfect unity of their climb to the brink of rapture, neither withholding anything from the other. Each urged the other upward toward the heights of ecstasy until together they tumbled over the edge of passionate fulfillment.

Afterwards Brian drew Rowan tightly into the circle of his arms. Neither of them spoke, for words seemed out of place.

now. But as he nuzzled her hair with his lips Brian marveled at the experience they had just shared. He knew now she was a woman to cherish—the kind of woman he had been looking for all his life. And more than that, she was the woman with whom he wanted to share the rest of his life.

Rowan awoke the next morning to feelings of confusion and uncertainty about her night with Brian. His lovemaking had seemed so right, so exquisitely satisfying then. But now, as she lay in bed next to him, she was beset by doubts. This wouldn't be the first time her heart had ruled her head. She had completely misjudged Charles Fogel and fallen in love with a handsome face that masked a very unhandsome person.

At that moment Rowan's bleak gaze dropped onto the tumbled pile of clothes next to the bed. Brian's jeans were lying where they had fallen the night before. A bit of white cloth showed where one of the pocket linings had been pulled out. From it a curved bar of silver-colored metal glinted. It was a key ring. Would one of its keys unlock the radio shed she'd discovered earlier? If she didn't seize this chance for rescue and Brian turned out to be the opportunist Bill took him for, she would curse herself for a gullible fool the rest of her days.

Stealthily Rowan slid from the bed and reached into Brian's open pocket, clamping her fist firmly around the keys inside so they wouldn't jingle as she drew them out. Then she grabbed her own clothes from the floor and silently slipped out of the room. She pulled her clothes on quickly in the living room and then tiptoed out onto the porch. The grass was soaked with dew, and it wet her shoeless feet as she padded softly toward the shoreline and the route she had taken the first morning when she'd found the shed. She scrambled up the steep trail and there

it was. The second key she tried opened the door. Inside on a table was the ham radio and it was a model she was familiar with.

The generator outside started easily. Back inside she had no trouble tuning the radio to the right frequency and finding a conversation she could interrupt with her plea for help. She was able to give her approximate location. Brian had told her that they were in Canada, in the Thousand Islands in the Saint Lawrence River. And she had discovered from her own sleuthing that the island belonged to Professor Lawrence Gustavson, Chairman of the Biology Department at the University of Toronto. She discovered that from a letter she found in one of Gustavson's old jackets. Since she didn't want the police involved, she said nothing about a kidnapping. Only that her boat had run aground on Gustavson's island and that her father, Bill, be informed so he wouldn't worry. When she'd finished transmitting her message, Rowan carefully locked the door to the radio shack and started back down the hill. Now that the deed was actually done and she no longer had a surge of adrenaline to spur her on, she was beginning to feel she'd made a mistake.

That feeling grew stronger when she returned to the bedroom and quietly returned the keys to his pocket. She stood looking at Brian, still sleeping obliviously, and realized that he had come to mean more to her in the last few days than even she could fully comprehend. And now she had betrayed him.

Outside on the porch she sank into a sturdy redwood rocker. An hour later he came out of the house and found her curled up there like an unhappy child.

"So there you are!" he called out. "I missed you when I woke up. Why'd you get up so early? From now on I want to wake up and find you there beside me."

When she didn't answer, he dropped down on one knee beside the rocker. Cupping her chin gently, he turned her face toward his. "Rowan, don't do this. What's the problem?"

"Nothing," she mumbled unconvincingly.

Brian's fingers tightened in reaction. "Don't give me that! It's last night, isn't it? You're upset about what happened between us."

Defensively she wrapped her arms tighter about her chest while she jerked her chin free from his grasp. "Last night was a mistake!" she choked out.

But he wasn't accepting that. Slowly he shook his head. "The way you responded to me was so right, so perfect," he countered, his voice deep and husky with emotion. "There was no mistake about last night. It was the most fantastic thing that ever happened to me. But it isn't just sex, Rowan. There's more to it than that. There's something very special between us. Let's give it a chance. You'll see," he continued warmly. "Maybe I can't convince you with words, but when we make love again, you'll see how special things are between us. You won't be able to deny the truth then."

And Brian was right. Later that afternoon he took her to his secret place, a crystal clear spring-fed pool. And there they made beautiful, magical love, exploding together in a shower of indescribable color compounded of earth, sky and sunlight.

When it was over, she lay resting damply against his heaving chest, feeling the thrum of his heart as he filled his lungs with deep, satisfying breaths.

"So perfect," he murmured lovingly in her ear, his voice a husky caress. "Rowan, we are so perfect together. You must see that now."

In answer she could only touch her lips to his strong neck and close her eyes. He

was right.

The rest of that long, exquisite day went by in a dream for Rowan. Lost in the clasp of Brian's hand on hers, she hardly noticed the walk back to the cabin. And that night, when they made love again, her love-sated mind could take in only the fact of her contentment and joy in the closeness of Brian's strong embrace.

It was barely light when Rowan opened her eyes the next morning. Turning her face to one side, she focused on the dark tendrils of hair curling at the base of Brian's cleanly sculpted neck. Delicately she reached out to wind one of the wayward strands around her finger. It clung to her skin, as if trying to hold her fast. And she desperately wanted to be bound to this man.

So much had changed for Rowan in the last twenty-four hours. She no longer cared about Brian's business dealings. Unlike the way she'd felt toward Charles, she knew that she was committed to Brian regardless of what he might have done. But, in any case, she could no longer believe that he was capable of the kind of treachery Bill had hinted at. He would prove himself innocent. She knew it now. And she was in love with him as she never had been with any man before — totally and completely.

If only she hadn't jeopardized it so stupidly. Once more her heart began to pound in her throat as her mind went back to the morning before, when she'd taken Brian's key to the radio shed. She'd give anything now to replay that scene. If she had the chance to do it all again, she would have stayed beside him and never left his bed. Wincing, she squeezed her eyes closed as though that would shut out the memory of what she had done.

Inching toward the side of the bed, she shifted her weight very gradually. As her feet found the floor Brian stirred but did

not awaken.

It was all she could do to keep from climbing back into the warm shelter of the bed with him. But she was too uneasy for that. Shivering in the chilly morning air, she pulled on a sweatshirt he'd found for her and stepped into her over-large cut-offs. Ignoring the goosebumps pebbling her legs, she padded quietly to the door, opened it with infinite care, and slipped out into the soft early morning light. A fine mist was rising off the water. And the air had a clean, just-washed feel about it.

This island was so pure, untouched by the exigencies of the real world, she thought as she walked to the water. She couldn't help feeling a bit like Eve in the Garden. But a tremor ran through her body as she drew out the analogy. Eve had ruined her Eden with her transgression. Had she, Rowan, done the same by betraying Brian's trust?

Suddenly with that thought her mind was made up. If she wanted to remain in Eden — not just this glorious physical place, but by Brian's side wherever he might go—she had to be honest with him. She would wake him now and tell him everything and hope that things would still be all right between them. She turned to head back to the cabin. But at that moment the distant drone of a motor disrupted the lake's early morning tranquility.

Rowan stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. The faint throb had become a loud roar as a speedboat with two men in it came straight toward her. The features of the two men had become distinct. The tall man was Paul Burton. The short, rounder figure was that of Wally Harding, Bill Emory's ace reporter.

Paul cut the motor and the aluminum boat slammed inexpertly against the frail wood dock.

"Just like in the James Bond movies," Wally crowed, his broad cheeks bright red

with excitement and exertion. He shot her a triumphant half-moon smile that seemed to split his round face. "Hop in, baby."

The sound of his irritating joviality released Rowan from her spell and she backed away, shaking her head. "Wally, there — there's been a terrible misunderstanding," she stammered.

"No misunderstanding, Rowan," Wally countered, as he lumbered heavily out onto the dock while Paul held on to one of the pilings. "We got your message loud and clear," he chortled. "Good work, Row, old girl. How did you manage it?" Without waiting for an answer, Wally galloped the fifty feet that separated them and seized her wrist, obviously intending to propel her toward the boat.

But Rowan pulled back stubbornly. "Wally," she began, "You're not listening to me at all. This is all a terrible mistake."

"You're damn right it is," an all-too-familiar voice snarled behind her. Wally dropped Rowan's wrist as she whirled to see Brian stalking rapidly down the path from the cabin. "Suppose the two of you tell me what the hell's going on, before I throw you off for trespassing."

"What are you going to do, call the Canadian Mounties and have us arrested?" Wally shouted derisively. "That's a laugh. You're the one who's going to be behind bars when that Senate committee gets through with you, Turner. And, by the way, kidnapping is another federal offense to add to your list."

Brian's stark gaze flickered contemptuously away from Wally's squat, belligerent form and focused on Rowan. "What's this fool talking about? How did these two creeps get here?"

"I—I called them," Rowan admitted, flushing miserably. "I was going to tell you..."

Her voice died as she watched Brian's dark eyes register incredulity, then bitter contempt. The scathing look he shot her seemed to wither her very soul.

"That's right," Wally chimed in with a well-timed jeer in his voice. "This little lady has made an ass out of you, Turner. How did she get to use your radio—steal the key when you were asleep?" he went on with a loud guffaw. The idea seemed to catch his fancy. "And just how did she get close enough to you to do that?" he leered, coming horribly close to the mark.

Just then a flicker of movement at the corner of her field of vision made her turn her head. It was Paul who had managed to sneak up behind Brian and was clutching a mean-looking driftwood club raised above his head.

"My God!" Rowan shrieked. "Brian!" But it was already too late. In a blur of motion Paul's lanky body rushed forward. Brian half-turned toward his assailant. But at that moment Paul's weapon came crashing down on his unprotected skull. It was only because Rowan's warning had made him turn slightly that the full force of Paul's blow was deflected slightly.

Rowan heard a wail of horror escape her own mouth. "Brian!" she screamed again, rushing forward to his limp form. He had fallen sideways into a tangle of driftwood, and his right leg was twisted under his body.

Kneeling down, she felt the goose egg forming on the back of his head. And one of her hands went to his neck, where, to her relief, she felt a strong, steady pulse.

Wally squatted next to her and straightened out the twisted leg. Still unconscious, Brian groaned, and Rowan's heart turned over.

"It's not broken, just sprained. These prep school types are made of rubber. He shouldn't have any trouble getting back to the cabin when he comes to. But if it'll

make you feel any better, there's a radio on the boat. And I'll alert the authorities as soon as we're out of the area."

"You bastard!" she spat out. "You're no doctor. You don't know how badly he's hurt. I refuse to let you leave him."

Ignoring her furious protests, as though she were nothing but an hysterical child, the two men turned to each other. "You grab her legs and I'll get her shoulders," Wally directed maddeningly.

Even when Paul finally had both ankles, Rowan didn't make it any easier for them. Wildly she flexed her legs and shoulder muscles. And her mouth wasn't still either as she cursed the pair all the way down the dock.

"Did you realize that she knew all these four-letter words?" Wally asked Paul in a shocked voice as they swung her over the side and into the boat. "I tell you, she's full of surprises. I never dreamed that angelic mouth could utter such vile expletives. You better sit on her, Paul, while I start the motor."

Paul proceeded to do just that, turning a fuming Rowan over on her stomach and squatting on top of her so that his bony haunches pinned her down.

Wally gave the dock a shove that nosed the bow of the small craft away and then opened the throttle. As the vessel leaped forward and raced away from shore he leaned over and shouted into Rowan's ear, "Your boyfriend was coming to just as we left, so he's not dead. Now sit up and start behaving like a lady."

"I'll behave like a lady when you start behaving like a human being, you creep! Now turn this boat around!"

Wally sighed elaborately and shook his head at Paul, as if to underline the lunatic incorrigibility of the whole female sex. Leaning forward once more, he made another attempt to reason. "I'm not going anywhere but back to D.C., Row. And if you keep jumping around under

poor old Paul this way, you'll overturn us and we'll drown. And then," he added with morbid triumph, "I won't be able to call a doctor for lover boy."

Even in Rowan's agitated state, Wally's little speech made sense. "All right," she gritted. "Let me up and I'll cooperate."

Gingerly Paul shifted his weight and allowed his prisoner to sit up uncomfortably. She was stiff and sore all over.

"That's better," Wally said with false heartiness. "I'll break out the CB as soon as we're out of Canadian waters." His words reassured her somewhat, but that brief respite was destroyed by his next remark. "What a great story this is going to make!" he crowed ecstatically. "I can just see the front page headlines now!"

They landed in the tourist town of Alexandria Bay where Wally insisted that Rowan get some jeans, a T-shirt and sandals. Rowan was despondent as Paul and Wally hustled her via taxi to the local airport.

"You'll feel better when we get back to D.C.," Wally assured as if he'd read her mind. "You'll see. Everything will be different back home."

But he was wrong. Everything felt wrong, starting with the impact of the capital city's famous heat and humidity. When she stepped out of the plane at National Airport, the muggy air settled around her like a wet wool blanket.

"Listen, Rowan," Wally offered as they maneuvered through the crowd in the terminal building. "Bill told me to bring you straight to his office. But you look like a zombie, so we'll stop at your apartment. You can catch a shower and a quick nap. Maybe that will perk you up."

Once she was in the familiar eclectic warmth of her small apartment, she had to blink to keep the tears from spilling from her eyes.

"Go take a shower," Wally ordered gruffly, "and then get some shut-eye. If it will make you feel any better, I'll call Bill. He's got someone monitoring your boyfriend's radio frequency now. Maybe we can find out what's been happening up there."

Rowan sat down on a chair. "Make the call right now," she urged. Wally complied. She heard him speaking to Bill in low tones. After putting down the receiver, he turned back to her.

"Brian Turner made a call to one of his cronies, who's on his way to pick him up now. So you can relax and stop worrying about him being dead."

Rowan heaved a great sigh of relief and gratefully climbed into a steaming shower. After pulling on the blue chenille robe that hung on the hook near the tub, she almost staggered back into her room. Rowan crawled gratefully between the crisp sheets on her four-poster bed. She had only to shut her eyes to plummet into merciful unconsciousness.

But only two hours later she was hauled back from the deep well of oblivion into which she had sunk by the sound of raucous male voices. She recognized the gruff tones of Bill Emory and Wally Harding, along with Paul Burton's excited tenor.

Rowan threw on some clothes and hurried into the kitchen. "What are you guys doing here?" she demanded.

Paul handed her a cup of coffee. "Waiting for you to wake up so we can talk."

"About what?"

Wally snorted impatiently. "About Brian Turner, of course. You do recall that he kidnapped you and kept you captive for almost a week?"

Rowan sipped her coffee slowly. "What about it?" she said at last.

Bill threw up his hands. "Look, Rowan, it's a terrific story. We want the

details so we can go to press with it before anyone else does. You've been out of touch so you don't know what's been going on. Ever since Turner disappeared, the newspapers have been going crazy. This has got to be the story of the decade, and you're sitting right on top of it. Now give!"

Rowan gave her boss an anguished look "Bill, I have to try and make you understand. Things have changed for me. I'm absolutely convinced that Brian Turner is innocent. And if we break a story like this, we'll only end up looking like fools when he proves he's not guilty."

Wally tilted his chair back and rolled his eyes ceiling-ward. "See, didn't I tell you?" he burst out. "She's been brainwashed. Turner's got her thinking he's Peter Pan, Santa Claus, and the Easter Bunny all rolled into one."

"Lay off," Paul muttered. "She's had a rough time." But Bill cut him short.

"Rowan, you are a newspaperwoman, a professional employed by me to do a job. I'm sorry to have to put it this way, but you *are* going to do that job—whether you like it or not. Now quit stalling and give us that information." Slowly she raised her eyes until they met his, then she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Bill. I'm not going to do it. You're just going to have to trust my judgment this time."

Wally looked at his boss and raised his eyebrows meaningfully. Bill slowly shook his head. "You're right about the brainwashing," he conceded. "I believe this is going to take some deprogramming on our part. Let's start with yesterday's *Washington Post* editorial on Mr. Wonderful. Maybe when Rowan has had a chance to look through some of these news stories, she'll revise her opinion."

Their campaign to bring Rowan around to their way of thinking started off mildly enough with newspaper clippings. But it soon escalated. For the next

two days she became a virtual hostage in her apartment while the three men took turns cajoling, reasoning, and finally haranguing. There was no chance of escape. One of them was always awake—guarding against just such an eventuality:

For the first time she got a taste of what it was like to be on the wrong side of Bill's crusades. But through it all she stubbornly held out. Every move of his was countered by a gesture of defiance on her part.

Ironically the battle of wills ended as it had begun—with a newspaper article—this time the lead story in the *Washington Post*.

"My God, look at this!" Paul exclaimed as he brought in the paper on the third morning of their siege. "Rowan was right all along. Turner has been vindicated."

"Lemme see that," Bill growled, snatching the paper out of the younger man's hands. Rowan watched his mouth drop open as he scanned the front page story. "Well, I'll be damned," he muttered, scratching the back of his head and then tossing the paper in her direction.

Picking it up off the table, Rowan read the story, quoting phrases as she progressed. "Totally cleared of all charges . . . Head of marketing responsible for misdirecting computer chips to unfriendly nations in payoff scheme . . . full confession after discovery by Turner's team of private investigators. . . Turner takes partial responsibility, admitting he should have been on top of the situation earlier, but officials exonerate him of any culpability in the matter."

Triumphantly she looked up at the three men who now confronted her sheepishly.

"I don't know what to say," Bill began. "You were absolutely right, Row. If we'd published that story about you and Turner, we'd have egg on our faces now."

"Rowan," Paul began. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about all of this. . . ." But his voice trailed off as he saw the weary blankness of her expression.

Finally Rowan spoke: "If the three of you really want do something for me, just leave me alone," she whispered, unable to muster up the energy for anything louder.

They looked at each other and then around the apartment. Uneasily Paul shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Rowan was an orderly person, and three days ago her abode had been immaculate. But now it looked as though a Marine detachment had used it for a bivouac.

Bill cleared his throat. "Don't you want us to clean up a bit before we leave? I'm afraid we've made sort of a mess."

"I think you guys have done more than enough," she muttered. "So why don't you just please leave."

Hastily Wally grabbed his jacket. And his companions followed his example.

"Take the day off, Rowan," Bill offered magnanimously as he left.

Rowan just sat there lowering her head and raising her trembling hands to her face. All the tears she had been holding back since she'd been dragged away from Brian suddenly came spilling out. They drenched her cheeks and flowed between her fingers, but they didn't make her feel any better — only more exhausted. She cried until there were no more tears left, only dry, racking sobs. Shakily she stumbled to her feet. She wanted to crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head, and stay there for a month.

Twenty-four hours later the shrilling of the phone broke the heavy stillness in Rowan's blue and white bedroom. Groggily her limp hand reached out to fumble for the receiver and press it to her ear.

"Rowan?" Bill's voice was asking. "Are you still asleep?"

"Uh-huh, I guess so."

"Okay, Sleeping Beauty, I have a bulletin for you. I've hired a maid service to clean your apartment. They ought to be arriving in an hour. So get dressed. But close your eyes on the way to the front door. I'll be there to take you out to brunch while they clean up."

"Okay," she finally agreed. "I ought to meet you at the door with a raised club, but I'm feeling too weak for that. So I'll settle for depleting your bank account at a restaurant instead." Her facetious threat apparently struck just the right note with Bill. His rich laughter echoed in Rowan's ear. "In that case we'll go to the Jockey Club. That will give you lots of room to maneuver."

The long sleep had refreshed Rowan enough that her mind began to function once again. Decisively she went to the phone book next to her bed and looked up Turner Enterprises. But when she dialed the number of the Washington office, all she got was an answering service. Not wanting to leave a message, she hung up. There was no residential number for Brian listed in the phonebook; it must be unlisted, she thought. Rowan bit her lip. Maybe there was a favor Bill could do her.

Her apologetic boss arrived flanked by two burly men in coveralls wielding vacuum cleaners, mops, and industrial-strength floor polish.

"Mighty Maids, Limited," Bill explained, gesturing at the formidable twosome. "And I think they've got their work cut out for them, so let's leave them to it."

On the way to the Jockey Club in a taxi Bill kept up a steady stream of shoptalk. Rowan didn't even pretend to hold up her end of the conversation, but he didn't seem to notice.

However, once they were settled at a quiet table in a corner of the elegant restaurant, her boss cleared his throat and

gave his companion a straight look.

"I want to make you understand something. The last few days have given me a lot to think about. What I did to you was unforgivable. I could see it because you're someone close to me. But it made me start wondering seriously about the tactics I've been using for years now — like bugging Brian Turner's boat, for example. I know a certain amount of questionable maneuvering in this business is unavoidable. But from now on I'm going to give more serious thought to the way I get a story."

Rowan's eyes widened. She had never expected anything like this from the tough and unyielding man who was her boss.

But his next words were even more surprising. "Rowan, I know what's been going through your head. You want to quit. And I don't blame you." It was true, she acknowledged inwardly.

"Don't quit now, Rowan," he appealed. "You've had a bad experience and you're upset. Give things a chance to settle back to normal before you make a decision like that."

Normal, Rowan thought, poking disinterestedly at her salad. How could things ever get back to normal? She had fallen in love with a man whose good opinion she had surely forfeited. Suddenly her chest felt tight. How was she going to get through this meal? Pushing the salad away, she leaned back in her chair.

"All right, I'll think about it," she told Bill. "I don't know how I'd pay next month's rent anyway if I quit now. But there is something you can do that I would appreciate very much."

Her boss raised a questioning eyebrow.

Before she lost her nerve, she plunged on. "You can get me Brian Turner's unlisted D.C. phone number. I called his office this morning, but it's just an answering service. And..." she paused, flushing under Bill's penetrating gaze. "I,

uh, I have to talk to him personally."

Bill reached across the table and covered one of her slender hands with a large paw. "I'll do my best."

And he did. That afternoon Bill's secretary called with the number she had requested.

Rowan couldn't still the tremor in her hands when she picked up the receiver again and started to press the buttons. Her breathing was labored in her own ears as she listened to the slow rings on the other end of the line. Her heart had begun to pound, and she felt short of breath. At the fourth ring she began to hope that he wouldn't answer after all. Suddenly she felt totally unprepared to speak. But as she was about to lower the receiver back into its cradle, she heard a peremptory click, followed by Brian's impatient baritone voice.

"Turner here."

At the sound of his dearly familiar voice her heart seemed to turn over. "Brian?" she got out, a little breathlessly.

There was a long silence. She stared down at the receiver. "Brian?" she repeated, even more uncertainly. "Are you okay?"

"How did you get this number?" he rasped, ignoring her question. "The telephone company only gave it to me yesterday." And then inspiration seemed to strike. He barked a harsh laugh. "Oh, but I'd forgotten your truly remarkable talent for prying."

The coldness of his tone sent a shudder up Rowan's spine. She'd guessed he would be angry. But the reality of it now hit her with full force. "Brian," she began hastily, willing her unsteady voice not to crack, "I want to explain about what happened on the island."

"Don't feel you have to explain, Ms. Strickland," he lashed out, his voice scourging her like a whip. "I know exactly

what happened on the island. I thought I understood amoral women, but you were certainly an education. I'd say you were really willing to go the distance, weren't you? Well, you won't get another chance. Don't bother to call this number again."

The receiver crashed on the other end of the line and the finality of the sound seemed to reverberate in Rowan's tiny living room. She stared at the instrument in her hand with horror, all the blood slowly draining from her cheeks. The pain he had inflicted with mere words was so sharp that it was like a knife wound. Protectively she wrapped her arms around her rib cage and began to rock back and forth, moaning softly.

Sometime that night, after she had shed all the tears there were, a bit of her old spark reignited itself. She loved Brian too much to simply accept this harsh dismissal. And there must be some way she could get him back, she told herself. She had to hold on to that idea if she wanted to keep her sanity. But no plan came to mind immediately. And until it did, she needed something to keep herself from wallowing in misery. Tomorrow she'd go back to the office. The work which had accumulated in her absence would occupy her time.

But as she sat at her desk the next morning, she couldn't concentrate. Her work had lost its allure and meaning. If only she hadn't lost Brian, but she knew he was gone forever. And what did she have left but to work herself into oblivion? Tears gathered in Rowan's eyes as she stared bleakly at the blank page in her typewriter.

Just then Wally poked his head around the corner. "Say, what's wrong with you? It's your well-heeled lover boy, isn't it?" he asked, not missing a beat. "He's given you the old heave-ho. Well, don't let it get you, Just —"

The end of his sentence was interrupted by a shower of paper clips. Rowan had picked up a box from her desk and thrown it at his head.

"I mean," Wally explained with an air of exaggerated patience, "don't let him get away with it. Go after him. You're supposed to be smart and ambitious. Well, people who are smart and ambitious don't sit around crying about their troubles. They make the right things happen for them."

"I've already—" Rowan tried to inject. But an ant might as well have tried to stop a bulldozer rolling downhill. Wally was on one of his favorite topics and refused to be interrupted.

"Why do you think I'm the top investigative reporter in this hick town? I haven't got where I am by sitting around on my thumbs and crying into my typewriter."

He was right, she had to concede. Obnoxious though he was, he did have a way of making things go his way. As her mind turned over the implications of this, Wally rambled on, telling story after story of his exploits. Most of them held little interest for her. She'd heard them dozens of times. But one did make her prick up her ears. Wally had once gotten into a famous movie star's hotel room for an interview by posing as a maid. Picturing Wally in a dress and frilly apron made Rowan smile, despite herself, but it also gave her an idea.

Wally looked up and caught her changed expression. "Well, I can see I've really cheered you up and given you something to chew on," he said complacently.

"Yes, you have," Rowan agreed. "Of course, I could never be quite the marvel you are, but you've got me thinking, Wally, and I have to thank you for that."

For the next three days Rowan used most of her spare time researching the in-

ner workings of Wardman Park, where Brian lived. Using the excuse that she was a freelance writer doing an article on grand old hotels of the east coast, she learned all about the operations of their restaurant, maid service, and mail delivery. And on the pretext of learning about some of their distinguished guests, she even managed to get a good idea of Brian's habits.

When in Washington, he was usually home Saturday mornings, and she discovered that he would be leaving for New Hampshire soon and had just shipped the antiques she'd seen in his apartment up there the day before. This information was all it took to put the wild scheme Rowan had been concocting into its final form. She knew she had to act quickly now, before Brian left the city.

The next morning, a uniformed, bewigged Rowan stood in front of the door to Brian's apartment. Cradled in her arms was a two-foot-high stack of neatly folded white towels which hid her face from view.

Well, it's now or never, she told herself, taking a deep breath before raising her hand to rap smartly on the wide mahogany door. Her knuckles were beginning to smart when she heard an irritable male voice shout "Who is it?"

"Maid service," she managed in a quavery tone that she tried to pitch higher than her normal voice.

"Go away, I'm busy," came the inhospitable reply.

She knocked again, and then suddenly wondered if he had a woman in there. The thought made her want to slink away instantly. But it was too late for that. The door was thrown open and a disheveled Brian stood glowering down at her.

"What is it?" Brian snapped. "I told you I was busy."

"I'm sorry, sir," she stammered hoarsely, trying to disguise her voice,

"but I'm new here and I have to do your room before I can go home today."

"Oh, all right," he muttered. "But stay out of the dining room, I'm working in there."

"Certainly, sir," she agreed, brushing quickly past as he stood aside and then closed the door behind her.

Once inside his bedroom, she shut the door and lifted the mass of artificial blond waves covering her red hair and stuffed the wig into a nearby dresser drawer. It took only a moment to fluff out her own thick curls. The next five minutes were occupied with makeup. As a final touch she dabbed her pulse points liberally with Seduction, a perfume she'd bought on impulse the day before. Its sexy name was more than appropriate for what she had in mind for Mr. Brian Turner.

Glancing down at the pile of towels strewn in front of the door, Rowan grinned. Hidden in their snowy midst was a sheer black lace nightgown calculated to weaken the resolve of a monk sworn to celibacy.

Lifting it out with one hand, she glanced quickly at the closed bedroom door. What if Brian surprised her in the act of putting it on? Well, she'd just have to take a chance on that, she thought, swiftly unbuttoning the front of her uniform. In the interest of a quick change she'd worn nothing underneath. So it was only a matter of moments before she was sliding the silky black material of the gown over her head, pulling it down over her breasts, and letting it fall gracefully around the neat curves of her hips. Pulling off her shoes, she kicked them under the bed. And soon her uniform and the pile of towels followed.

The effect of the slinkily inviting gown with her fiery curls and creamy skin was spectacular. Rowan's courage almost failed her as she stared at her temptress image. What would Brian's reaction be?

Well, she told herself grimly, turning away from the mirror and looking speculatively at the bed, if he throws me out in this getup, then I'll really know it's all over between us.

Rowan folded back the coverlet on Brian's king-sized bed and lay down with her head where Brian's had been and sighed with relief. He could come in now, and she would be ready. But though she waited stiffly for the next fifteen minutes, he did not come in.

Rowan sighed and closed her eyes. As her mind drifted her body's exhaustion took over. Gradually, unaware of what was happening, she slipped into a deep sleep. And as she slept she pulled up her knees and curled into a ball.

Later Brian's dark eyes dilated as he stared fixedly at the broad bed in the center of the room. What was Rowan doing here? he asked himself. This had to be some new trick. But at this moment it didn't matter. She made a picture at once so vulnerable and so exciting that he could no longer continue standing motionless in the doorway. He had watched her in her sleep before, and it had always affected him powerfully. But this time the effect on him was instantaneous. He had to do something. And what he wanted to do was to gather her into his arms and make love to her a thousand and one different ways.

It was the feel of warm, insistent hands on her cool shoulders that awakened Rowan. The lids shielding her drowsy blue eyes lifted, and she stared up in confusion at the hard, dark face above her. Their gazes locked for a long moment. And though Brian said nothing, mere words seemed superfluous. Eagerly her naked arms reached up to encircle his strong neck and draw him close.

"Rowan," he groaned. And that was the only word spoken between them for

the next few minutes. His fevered lips devoured her mouth, her cheeks, her eyelids, her neck, and the hollow of her throat where a frenzied pulse had sprung to life. Brian was like a starving man who had suddenly been offered a sumptuous feast. He couldn't get enough of her. And she in turn was just as hungry for him. Her urgent need for this man rose to meet his. She had been dreaming of Brian's touch, of his lips and hands on her flesh.

His hands left her body only long enough to unsnap his jeans and impatiently wriggle free. In a moment they had been kicked heedlessly to the floor. It was Rowan who pulled his shirt off while he snaked the filmy nightgown down over her hips.

At last she had access to his body. Her silky-smooth legs twined eagerly with his hair-roughened ones. And her fingers joyfully kneaded the muscles of his back and shoulders. It was impossible for her to lie still. Her body wanted to move against him, to feel the friction of flesh against flesh — to surround and envelop him with her love.

The climb to the heights of ecstasy was swift for both of them, for they had each secretly focused on this moment in their imaginations. As Rowan felt a deep shudder of release pass through Brian's body she was overwhelmed by her own all-engulfing climax. The joy of it was almost too much to bear. Tears of gladness filled her eyes, and she clung to Brian as though anchoring herself against the force of a hurricane.

She wanted to go on clinging to him, to hold him close to her forever. But almost as soon as his passion had spent itself, the weight of his body left her. Her eyes snapped open, and she saw him sit up, his back squarely to her and his feet firmly on the floor.

So their lovemaking hadn't meant the same thing to him as it had to her, she

thought brokenly. It had just been a temptation he couldn't resist.

The thought of losing him now was unbearable. Although she fought desperately for control, silent tears began to leak out between her now tightly closed eyelids and trail down her cheeks.

Please, she thought. Brian, don't turn around. Just get up off the bed and leave before you see me like this. Despite her valiant struggle not to give her misery away, a muffled sob escaped her throat.

"Another of your tricks?" he rasped. "Are you trying to tear my guts out?"

Rowan opened her eyes. They were so wet with tears now that she saw him only as a blur. Brian had turned so that he was facing her on the bed, his face a mask of dark emotion. She struggled to answer his cruel question. But her voice was no longer under her control. Yet she had to communicate with him somehow. Pushing herself into a sitting position, she threw herself forward against his chest, her arms sliding around his neck to hold him fast. She felt the stiffness of his body, as though she were clinging to a living statue.

It was then that the miracle happened. Slowly the stiffness went out of Brian's form. She felt his arms come up to stroke the soft flesh of her back and shoulders. And then his head bent and his lips tasted her tears.

"Rowan, don't do this to me," he pleaded. "I can't stand it. I love you too much to see you this way."

In wonder she raised her own face. He loved her! He had said he loved her!

The words made more tears flow, this time tears of joy, not sorrow. But she must speak now, she must. "Brian," she choked out between sobs. "Oh, Brian. I—I love you so very much. The thought of losing you hurt like—" The effort became too much again, and she simply clung to him, trying to bring her emotions under

control.

But she knew that she must not hide if he were to know she was speaking the truth. Raising her head, she searched the ebony darkness of his eyes and then began to speak quickly before she lost her nerve. "Brian, I would have given anything not to have made that radio call. The morning afterwards I was in agony. That's why I told you our lovemaking had been a mistake.. I was so ashamed of myself. And then I was afraid you would hate me. But I swear, I was on my way back to the cabin to tell you what I'd done when Wally and Paul showed up. After Paul hit you over the head, I tried to stay with you. They had to carry me off kicking and screaming then."

Anxiously she watched Brian's expression. But it remained calm as he reached out to stroke her cheek. For a long moment he did not speak. And she held her breath, wondering what his reaction would be.

"Rowan," he said at last. "You've got more guts than I have. I've been blaming you for what you did to me. But I've finally realized that it was as much my fault as yours. If I had just trusted you, opened up, and told you the whole story you never would have made that call."

"Oh, Brian, don't blame yourself," Rowan protested, but he silenced her.

"There are things I have to tell you too," he whispered hoarsely, "things that have been keeping me awake at night."

The serious tone of his voice made her raise her head again and search his face anxiously.

"I wasn't acting very responsibly back there on the island," he explained. "I could have gotten you pregnant, you know."

Rowan felt her cheeks grow hot. "Well, it takes two to do that," she pointed out. "Brian, I thought about that too. And, of course, out there in the mid-

dle of nowhere I wasn't prepared. But I just couldn't stop myself. I wanted you too much."

"Yes, love, I know." He smiled at her tenderly and ran his hand delicately along the line of her cheekbone. "When I got back to Washington, I kept telling myself I never wanted to see you again. But at the same time I kept having this fantasy that you might be pregnant. Part of me kept hoping that you were, so I'd have to marry you."

His words brought a strong tide of emotion sweeping over Rowan. "Part of me wanted to be pregnant too," she admitted in a small voice.

Brian tightened his strong arms around her slender body and gathered her closer against the broad wall of his chest. For a little while neither of them spoke. And then Rowan heard him chuckle.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I was just thinking, I've gone and put you in jeopardy again. So now you're going to have to marry me." For a moment he looked quite pleased with himself. And then his expression became worried. "Uh, that didn't come out quite the way I meant it. I don't mean that I want to marry you just because I might have gotten you pregnant. I mean I want to marry you because I love you and I want to share my life with you. You will marry me, won't you?"

"Yes. Because I love you and want to share my life with you and have your children," Rowan told him.

Tenderly his lips sought hers then. But when she turned her face up so that her mouth could fuse with his, she felt his passion and her own rise anew.

At once their bodies began to move together in turbulent harmony. Wave after wave of intense feeling swept over both of them, as each whispered words of love to the other. And then both were tumbling over the edge of passion into an

explosive climax. But still they clung together tightly, wanting to stretch this timeless moment to its fullest.

It was Rowan who finally, reluctantly, broke the silence. "Brian," she began. "I was so nervous about my maid act this morning that I couldn't get down anything but a cup of black coffee. I'm starving."

"We can send out for room service. What do you want?"

"I don't know. How about an ice cream soda?"

Brian gave her a startled look. "Are you quite sure you're not...?"

"Absolutely sure. But I love ice cream sodas."

"Well, you can have an ice cream soda for dessert, but you've had rather a strenuous afternoon. And I do think you need something a bit more substantial. You might enjoy a steak dinner. I know I would."

"You're on," Rowan told him. "If I really can get my ice cream soda for dessert."

After Brian had phoned down their order, Rowan slipped back into her black gown. "It's either this or the maid's uniform I kicked under the bed," she giggled.

"Actually you don't make much of a maid. Look at this bed. You didn't even change the sheets. You just made a total mess of them."

"Well, I did have a little help," Rowan pointed out.

"And speaking of jobs," Brian asked, changing the subject. "Are you going to keep yours after we get married?"

"Bill kept me chained to a desk for a long time," Rowan told him. "And I took you on because I was looking for some excitement. But it looks as if I'm going to be able to get all the excitement I need at home from now on."

Brian pulled her into his arms. "If I had

my way, I'd keep you chained to the bed."

"Now you're not going to turn out to be one of those male chauvinists, are you?" she sputtered.

"Just testing." He grinned. "I know your career is important to you."

Rowan nodded. "My career is important. And when we have kids, I'll probably freelance for a while so I can stay

home with them."

"So you have it all planned," Brian marveled, pulling her closer.

But a loud knock on the door interrupted their embrace. "That must be dinner," Brian informed her. "And we'd better eat. Because I have plans for the rest of the evening. You may be counting on an ice cream soda, but I'm counting on something quite different for dessert." ♥

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Fallen Angel

When Mallory Victor falls for staid Dr. David Hitchcock, they seem like the perfect match. But then David discovers that she is also Molly V, a famous rock singer, and the trouble begins

CAROLE BUCK

He was, Mallory Victor decided after careful consideration, the most attractive man she'd ever seen—especially in the frozen foods section of a supermarket. Vacillating between a package of frozen peas with sliced mushrooms and a package of frozen peas with pearl onions, she studied him covertly from beneath long, lowered lashes.

She decided he was probably in his mid-thirties—about six or seven years older than her own twenty-nine. He was a shade

over six feet tall, and despite the camouflage of his tan trenchcoat, there was something about the easy, confident way he moved that told her he was a man who kept himself in good shape.

He had thick, sandy-brown hair that was windblown from the inclement, wintry weather, and he wore horn-rimmed glasses that had slipped down his aquiline nose several times since she'd begun watching him.

He wasn't conventionally handsome.

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His features were craggy and a bit uneven. Yet he projected an aura of compassionate intelligence—of utterly masculine gentleness—that Mallory found deeply appealing.

He seemed so assured. So comfortable with himself.

So . . . normal.

Mallory dropped two cans of frozen orange juice into her shopping cart, a frown shadowing her gamine features. *Normal*. What did she know about normal after the life she'd led for the past ten years? Normal to her was the rock-and-roll roller coaster. It was an endless blur of one-night gigs, screaming fans, prying reporters, and a multiplying horde of hangers-on. Normal to her was having what should be personal, private moments turned into public circuses.

Dr. David Lenox Hitchcock first noticed her in the bakery section, which was one aisle before the frozen foods department. It was her scent—a faint but haunting mix of floral and musk—that captured his attention initially, piercing his normal end-of-a-long-day preoccupation with insinuating delicacy.

She was about five feet five and slender to the point of fragility, although there was no mistaking the femininity of her slim figure. Her clothes—tight jeans, exotic high-heeled boots, and a lemon yellow down jacket—were youthfully trendy, but there was an air of experience about her that said she'd left her girlhood behind a long time before. Her hair was mink brown and fell in a cloud-soft tumble of curls that emphasized her high cheekbones and her unexpectedly provocative mouth.

But the thing that struck him most forcefully was the contradiction he sensed in her, even at a distance. There was something extraordinarily sensual about her, yet he felt a strange, balancing in-

nocence as well. She radiated poise, yet there was a faintly furtive—almost fearful—air about her, too.

He had a sudden, powerful urge to take that fear away. He wanted to protect her. To release the tensions so plainly locked up within her. He wanted to . . .

You want to what, Hitchcock? he asked himself with an edge of self-mockery. You want to slay whatever dragons the lady has with your trusty stethoscope, then sweep her off in your faithful VW? Where would you sweep her to? Your place is a mess, now that Mrs. Winslow's out with the flu. Plus, the way things have been going lately, your service would phone in the middle of the big seduction scene.

Who is he? Mallory wondered again, picking over the cellophane-wrapped chicken pieces on display in the meat and poultry section of the store.

He was several yards away, looking at ground beef with an air of rapt concentration. He selected one package, put it into his car, and then wheeled down toward the fish section. The middle-aged butcher working behind the counter gave him a friendly nod of acknowledgment. The sandy-haired man smiled in return. The change of expression was quick but wonderfully warm.

Suddenly Mallory wanted him to smile at her. And she wanted to smile back. She hadn't felt like smiling at a man in a long, long time. . . .

She noticed his beautiful hands as she checked for a wedding ring. They spoke of great power . . . and infinite tenderness. There was a touch of the artist in those hands, and an impression of controlled, tempered capability as well.

Mallory felt an unexpected and disturbing shiver of excitement run through her. It had been nearly a year since she'd known a man's touch—a lover's caress.

Yes, she'd had the comforting closeness of friends and the enthusiastic embrace of an audience, but there had been no one since the death of her husband, Bobby Donovan.

There'd been no one except Bobby when he was alive, either; although, Lord knew, she'd had the opportunity. And, some might say, the justification, given her late husband's infidelities.

"Excuse me?"

Mallory started, her pale face going even paler.

"Yes?" Her voice was low and not quite steady.

The inquiry—two, nonthreatening words—had come from the man behind the counter. He was gazing at her questioningly.

"You seem to be havin' a hard time makin' up your mind, Miss," the man observed. "Somethin' I can help you with?"

Mallory relaxed a little. He didn't know who she was! He was treating her just like any other customer.

"Actually—" Mallory darted a quick glance down toward the sandy-haired stranger. She debated with herself for a moment, then gave into curiosity and impulse. "Could you—do you know who that man is? He—ah—looks familiar."

It sounded lame. But, to her surprise, the meat counter man nodded emphatically. "Sure thing. That's Dr. Hitchcock. He's got a practice here in Farmington. My brother's family goes to him."

"Oh. Well—"

"He organized some kind of free medical clinic in Hartford, too," the man went on. "You know—gettin' around all the red tape and bringin' medical help to people who really need it. He got some sort of White House award for that. His picture was in the paper for it. That's probably why he looks familiar."

"That must be it," Mallory agreed. She

was impressed by Dr. Hitchcock's resume—and a little intimidated. "Well, thank you very much." Smiling her appreciation, she picked up a package of chicken breasts.

The produce department. They were now less than a yard apart. Mallory could feel his eyes on her. She held her breath, a giddy nervousness fizzing through her.

"Excuse me," David said. "Do you know anything about picking out a good pineapple?" He smiled encouragingly. He felt his pulse pick up when she smiled back.

"I'm afraid I don't," Mallory admitted reluctantly, hoping her negative answer wouldn't put an end to his smile. "I—I do know how to pick out a good cantaloupe," she volunteered. Improvise, she instructed herself, you're good at that.

"Cantaloupes, hmm?" David echoed. "I was wondering about them, too."

"Well, they're not in season right now, of course," Mallory said, filling the brief silence. "But the way you can pick out a ripe one is by pressing the green circle on the stem end. If it gives, the melon's ready. You can sniff that end, too. If you smell cantaloupe, that's a good sign."

"I never knew that."

"My husband taught me about cantaloupes," she told him.

"Your—husband?"

Mallory recognized his change of mood and stiffened, her expression becoming guarded. "My husband, Bobby," she explained briefly. "He's... dead."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Has it been—" "Eight months. He died in a boating accident." It came out in a rush. She wanted to stave off further questions... and answers.

"I see." David acknowledged the information sympathetically.

Mallory cleared her throat. "Does your... wife... do something special with

pineapples?" she asked, inclining her dark head toward the fruit display.

David's glasses started to slip out of place once again. He shoved them back up. "I'm not married."

"Oh." She wondered if there was some kind of polite, proper response to make. She was certain that, "that's great," wasn't it. She settled for the carefully neutral *oh*.

"By the way, my name is David Hitchcock." He put out his hand.

Mallory took it. The firm touch of his palm against hers had an electrifying effect on her. It triggered a quiver of sexual awareness that reached clear down to her toes.

"And you're—?"

Mallory hesitated. While David apparently hadn't recognized her face, she was afraid her name might ring a bell. "I'm Mallory Victor." He repeated her name as though he enjoyed the sound of it.

"Are you new to Farmington?"

Mallory touched her hair, the unabashed interest in his eyes flustering her slightly. "I've been here for about two weeks. I'm staying at a friend's place."

"Oh." He tried not to think about the possibility—the likelihood, given her looks and style—that the friend was a man. "Are you on vacation, then?"

Mallory hesitated, debating her answer. "Sort of," she said finally, opting for a partial truth rather than an outright deception. "I'm . . . taking some time off from my work."

He nodded, wondering if she was having problems coming to terms with her husband's death. He could see hints of stress in her dark eyes, and she was definitely on the underweight side of thin.

"Are you from Farmington?" she asked him. She was genuinely curious about his background. She was also aware that as long as he was answering her questions,

she wouldn't have to answer his.

"Born and raised here."

"It's a beautiful town," she remarked sincerely, a sparkle coming into her dark eyes. "I like New England a lot. There's such a sense of . . . oh, history and stability." Of all the places she'd traveled on tour in the past ten years, New England had always held a special attraction. When she'd told her manager, Bernie McGillis, that she had to get away, she'd mentioned New England longingly. He, through some undisclosed maneuvering, had come up with a condominium in Farmington, Connecticut.

"Are you from this part of the country?" David asked.

"I was born in the Midwest. Ohio. I have a place in California now." It was in the hills outside Los Angeles. She and Bobby had bought it three years before. They'd only spent about six months in it. Much of what they—she—owned was still in packing crates.

They'd started to wheel their carts down the aisle, moving together in companionable rhythm. "Didn't you want a pineapple?" Mallory asked after a brief but comfortable silence.

"I hate pineapple," he said with a grin. "But it seemed like a good way to start a conversation."

Mallory felt herself flush a little as she followed him to join one of the check-out lines.

It was waiting for her in a wire newspaper rack: a black and white time bomb that exploded in her consciousness like a burst of silent agony.

She saw the huge-eyed, grainy picture of her face first, staring out from the front page of a nationally known tabloid. Then she read the banner headline: *Molly V Mystery: Having Bobby's Baby?*

Mallory swayed, the blood draining from her cheeks. Nausea clawed at her stomach. She clutched at the slick metal

push bar of her cart, fighting a sickening wave of dizziness.

David saw the change come over her with a surge of alarm that went far beyond professional concern or brief personal acquaintanceship. He had no idea what had triggered the reaction. He only knew that she'd been smiling one moment and was pale and shaken the next. She looked like a woman caught unaware by a nightmare.

He moved to her swiftly, reaching out to steady her. Their bodies touched intimately for a few seconds, hers as boneless as a rag doll's, his rock-steady, comforting.

"Mallory?" he questioned, his eyes very intent and assessing. With instinctive professionalism, he brought one hand up, deftly seeking the pulse point at the side of her throat. It beat out a rapid, pounding rhythm beneath his fingers.

"I'm—all right. Just a little dizzy," she said as firmly as she could. The urge to lean against him, to draw on what she sensed was his bedrock of emotional and physical strength, was almost irresistible, but she did not give in to it.

"Have you had dizzy spells before?" He was relieved to see some color creeping back into her cheeks.

Mallory shook her head and positioned her cart alongside the check-out counter.

"I'm all right, really," she said. "I—I skipped lunch and that probably made me a little lightheaded." She began to unpack her groceries.

"Are you sure?" David insisted.

Mallory could sense his curiosity and concern and she wanted to deflect them... at least for now. Although instinct told her she could trust this man, experience had made her extremely cautious about opening up to people. She wanted to know David Hitchcock better—she *would* know him better—and then, maybe then, she would tell him the truth about herself... Bobby... and the angel

on her wrist.

"Don't worry, Dr. Hitchcock," she said, injecting a teasing note into her voice and taking special pains to emphasize his professional title. "I'm okay."

It wasn't exactly a brush-off, but David had an unpleasant suspicion it might turn into one if he pushed her. The last thing in the world he wanted was to lose this woman before he had a chance to know her... to touch her...

"Okay," he nodded, giving her a reassuring grin.

They exited the store about ten minutes later, pushing carts filled with bagged groceries. The blustery wind was brisk and bone-chillingly cold and there was about a foot of snow on the ground. Although the supermarket parking lot had been well plowed, the pavement was still very slick, and Mallory had to pick her path gingerly due to the fashionable high heels of her boots.

"Um... this is my car," she said, taking refuge in the prosaic as she wheeled her cart up beside a gray Ford sedan.

David helped her load her groceries into the trunk, lifting and positioning the heavily packed bags with dexterity and precision.

"Thank you," Mallory told him, tilting her chin slightly to smile up into his eyes.

"You're welcome," he replied.

There was a silence on both sides. Their eyes locked in an exchange of messages neither one of them was quite ready to voice.

"Have dinner with me later tonight?" David invited at last. "Unless you have plans?" he tacked on, recalling her mention of a friend's place.

"No plans," she replied honestly. Plans were something Mallory had been avoiding.

"Then—?"

"Yes," she said simply, "I'd love to

have dinner with you."

"Bernie—" Mallory began, exasperated, trying unsuccessfully to stem the flood of her manager's words gushing out of the phone into her ear.

"Molly, just listen to me. This is a terrific deal—"

"Bernie, *no!*" she interrupted emphatically, wishing for the zillionth time that her manager wouldn't call her Molly. "I'm not going to do a poster posed in lingerie."

"Babe, I'm trying to help you. You've had your career on hold for months now. I know the last Fallen Angel album's still hot, but you—Molly V—are going to cool off if you don't get some exposure soon."

"Exposure as in this poster?"

"Exactly," he said emphatically, apparently oblivious to her sarcasm. "Look, I'm really trying to be understanding, but you're making it very hard. First, you tell me not to negotiate a new recording contract even though I've got at least four top labels drooling offers on my desk. Then you pull some kind of weird withdrawal stunt and just sit around while Fallen Angel falls apart and Colin Swann picks up the pieces. Are you nuts? How could you let yourself be dumped by the best back-up band in the business?"

"To begin with, Bernie, they didn't *dump* me. They're professional musicians and they want to work. I couldn't ask them to sit around doing nothing while I was making up my mind about what I want to do with my life."

"So you let Swann—"

"Don't try to paint him as a villain. You know as well as I do that that last album would never have been finished if Colin hadn't stepped in when Bobby died."

"Maybe," Bernie grunted. "But now he's formed Nightshade and has Coney,

Rick, and Boomer with him on tour. Where does that leave you?"

"In Connecticut," she snapped.

"Honey, you're tying my hands! Look, how am I supposed to do my job if you won't give me a hint of what you want?"

"Bernie, the only thing I want at this point is for you to hang up so I can figure out what I'm going to wear when I go out tonight," she said.

"*Out?* As in with a guy?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

Mallory closed her eyes for a moment. "None of your business," she replied.

"Molly," Bernie began, adopting a patient, long-suffering voice. "Molly, babe, I've got your best interests at heart. If you're getting involved with somebody—"

"Bernie, I've got to run. Bye. Thanks for calling."

And, in an unprecedented move, Mallory hung up on her manager.

"David, this is lovely," Mallory said about forty minutes later as they settled into an intimate corner table in the restaurant he'd chosen for their first dinner together.

He smiled at her, pleased by her reaction. "I'm glad you approve," he told her. "You said you liked New England. I thought this place might appeal to you."

"Oh, it does," she assured him, flattered that he had remembered her remark in the supermarket.

The restaurant was a converted gristmill. Despite its out-of-the-way location, a quick glance revealed that it was doing a booming business with a well-heeled and discriminating clientele.

"Do you see anything you like?" David asked, a little amused by the greedy way she was poring over the menu.

"Everything!" she said with a little laugh. "I'm starving."

"I like a woman who appreciates good food," he commented. There was a faint, flirtatious drawl to the way he spoke.

Mallory's mouth curved up at the corners. "I thought doctors were supposed to lecture people about the dangers of overeating."

"Mmm... probably. But, as a man, I have to say I approve of a healthy appetite." The drawl progressed from flirtatious to provocative. "Besides, I don't think you have to worry about overeating."

Her lips parted on a responsive smile, revealing the tiny chip that marred an otherwise even line of white teeth. "Thank you—I think," she replied.

"Don't think. It was a compliment. And you're welcome." Lifting his water glass, he toasted her. "To a healthy appetite, Ms. Victor."

Flushing slightly, she lifted her own glass. "To a healthy appetite, Dr. Hitchcock."

Then Mallory relaxed, enjoying David's easy charm and an absolutely delicious meal. It had been a long time since she'd had an evening like this.

"You never did tell me what kind of work you do," David remarked casually, nodding his thanks to the waiter who had just refilled their water glasses.

Mallory stalled for a moment, toying with her fork. "I write music," she said finally. "And I... sing."

He took a sip of his wine. "I know this is probably the worse thing to admit at this point," he commented with a rueful smile. "But I'm not... familiar... with your work."

"That's all right. It's rock and roll. I don't think it would be your kind of thing, anyway."

"I strike you as that far out of it?"

"What? Oh, no. No, of course not," she assured him hastily. While she had no doubt that David Hitchcock preferred

Haydn to heavy metal, she didn't want him to think she held that against him.

David grinned at her. Behind the glasses, his eyes were warm and teasing. "It's okay, Mallory. Thanks to Lori, I'm well aware that I'm not exactly with it."

"Lori?"

"My sister. Half sister, if you want to be precise. My mother died when I was fourteen. My father remarried a couple of years later. A year after that, Lori was born. She's sixteen now."

"And very much with it?" Mallory guessed.

"She likes to think she is," he conceded with equal parts affection and exasperation.

Mallory drank some of her wine. "Did you always want to be a doctor?" she asked after a moment, thinking about her own youthful ambitions... and how hard she'd worked to fulfill them.

David moved his wine glass in a circle. "I always had an affinity for medicine," he said slowly, "but I decided to become a doctor when I was fourteen, when my mother died."

His devotion to medicine was inextricably linked to his mother's untimely—her *unnecessary*—death. But it was not something he spoke about easily.

"Now do you mind if I ask you something personal?"

He saw a hint of wariness appear in her brown eyes, muting their brightness like a shadowy windowshade.

"You can ask," she replied cautiously.

But you won't necessarily answer, David tacked on silently.

"I was wondering about the wings on your wrist," he said after a fractional pause. "I saw the mark yesterday when you rubbed your head in the supermarket. And again tonight—"

"Oh, you mean my tattoo," she said, striving for a casual tone.

"Your tattoo?"

She nodded. "A . . . souvenir of my ill-spent youth," she explained, still trying to sound offhand. All the members of Fallen Angel had had angel tattoos when she'd first joined Bobby on the road. Mallory had gotten one herself primarily out of a desire to fit in. She'd wanted—needed—to belong.

"It's—what? A bird?"

"It's an angel," she told him softly.

He responded with a slow, teasing smile. "Is it supposed to be you?" he asked. An angel would suit her, he thought.

Mallory dropped her eyes, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "I . . . I've been accused of being a lot of things," she said reflectively, and for a fleeting moment her expression took on a melancholy cast, "but an angel isn't one of them."

It was nearing midnight when David pulled up before the condominium where Mallory was staying. He parked beside a street lamp, and its soft glow illuminated the interior of the car. It frosted the dark cloud of Mallory's hair with silver and underscored the gamine quality of her face.

"So," David said, undoing his seat belt and turning toward her.

"So," she echoed, undoing her seat belt and shifting to face him.

He gave her a slow, crooked grin. "Don't ask me why, but I'm suddenly feeling like I'm back in high school."

The implicit admission of uncertainty surprised her for a moment. But the honesty of his words touched her because she thought she understood what he was trying to say. The sexual chemistry between them—right here, right now—was as unnerving as it was intensely exciting.

She cleared her throat. "You mean . . . you're wondering how far I'm going to let you go on the first date?"

He chuckled deep in his throat, feeling more in tune with her than he ever had

with a woman in his life. "To tell the truth, Mallory," he replied, his voice dropping as he leaned forward to stroke the side of her face, "I'm wondering how far I'm going to let myself go."

Mallory moistened her lips with a flick of her tongue. . . . waiting.

The gray in his eyes turned to molten silver. "I suppose there's only one way to find out, isn't there?" he asked and drew her to him.

It was a kiss of slow, heated sweetness . . . intoxicating as mulled wine. David's lips closed over hers with a hungry tenderness that provoked and promised, fueling the honeyeyed urgency that surged through her responsive body.

It was a kiss of adult desire, yet it held a hint of innocence. There was an enchanting, evocative freshness to this caress: the offering of new and fruitful beginnings. It was a kiss of testing. . . . and trusting.

When they finally pulled apart, silence filled the car. It lasted for the space of two . . . three . . . four heartbeats.

"Well," Mallory said at last, trying to fight off an awareness that she was perfectly willing to go on sitting in the car with him for the rest of the night. "Well, I think I'd better go in. This evening was very special to me, Dr. Hitchcock."

"It was special for me, too," he responded, running the tip of one finger tenderly down the curve of her cheek. "Would you consider doing this again? Having dinner with me, I mean." He withdrew his hand and gestured around the car. "Not the—ah—rest."

Mallory opened the door and got out before she answered. Feeling a little lightheaded, she bent to look at him. "Yes, I'd consider having dinner with you again," she confirmed softly, and very carefully shut the door.

She'd considered having lunch and breakfast with him, too. In fact, given the slightest hint of encouragement, she knew

she'd consider doing "the rest" with him again as well.

Two weeks later, Mallory stood in a clearing in David's two-acre wooded backyard, laughingly throwing snowballs. The snowball fight had not been on their original agenda. When David had invited her to spend the day with him, he'd also requested her help in picking out some presents for his half sister's upcoming birthday. The plan had been that they would have an early lunch at his place, go shopping afterward, then play the rest of the day by ear.

It had been a good plan—especially, Mallory had thought, the playing it by ear part. Unfortunately, the lure of the sun sparkling on a fresh new blanket of snow had tempted them into a tramp around David's property.

Now, tired, cold and thoroughly covered with snow, David suggested they go into the house and "warm up."

Mallory blushed at his words as they headed back. Although they had touched and kissed the past two weeks, they had both restrained themselves from anything more.

Inside the telephone was ringing. Mallory had the feeling it had been ringing for some time.

David gave her a ruefully apologetic smile as he picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" His voice was level and polite but his hands weren't quite steady as he began to unsnap his parka. "Yes, this is Dr. Hitchcock."

Mallory caught her breath as she saw him stiffen in response to what was being said on the other end.

"Yes, I understand," David was saying. His features had gone grim. "Right away. Thank you for calling me—what? Yes, please. Tell them." He dropped the phone back into its receiver and turned to face Mallory.

"Look, Mallory," he said, "I've got to go to the hospital and see a patient. I don't know that there's anything I can do at this point, but the family is asking for me—"

"I understand," she said immediately. She did understand why he had to leave. David's commitment to his work was something she admired and respected.

He looked surprised. "I have no idea how long this will take," he told her frankly.

"I'd like to wait." The initial pledge had come out of her spontaneously, but she realized she meant it sincerely. "If—if you don't mind, that is."

For a moment, the grimness disappeared from his face. His mind embraced and cherished the idea of having Mallory waiting for him when he came back from whatever he was going to have to face at the hospital. "I don't mind at all," he said softly.

It felt a little strange being alone in David's house. Strange, yet oddly right. Mallory had felt like a transient in the world since her parents' deaths. She knew, instinctively, that this was a place a person could settle... put down roots.

She hung up her yellow down jacket and the rest of her outdoor things on the gleaming brass coat rack sitting next to the front door. After a moment, she removed her boots, wiggling her toes against the slightly worn but still beautiful Oriental rug on the polished wooden floor. She peeled off the black angora sweater she had put on over a full-sleeved rose silk shirt and hung it up, too.

She was curled up in a brown leather chair in the corner of the living room, soothed to sleepiness by the fluid magic of Handel's "Water Music," when the doorbell chimed. The sound jerked her upright, shattering the daydreams she had been weaving and leaving her momentarily disoriented.

"Uh—" Mallory got to her feet, brushing her hair out of her face. "Uh—just a minute!" she called.

She opened the ebony front door a few moments later and came face to face with a petite, pixie-pretty teenager. The girl seemed as surprised to see her as she was to see the girl.

"Uh—hi," the teenager said, studying her with big blue eyes. She had a porcelain complexion and short, curly blond hair. "I'm Lori Hitchcock. Is my brother here?"

Mallory shook her head. "I'm afraid not," she replied. "He's out on an emergency call."

"*That* figures," Lori responded, slumping. "Rats." She dragged the last word out with a funny grimace. "Is he going to be gone long?"

"I don't know."

"Can I wait around? I've had a fight with my parents, and I wanted to talk to him about it."

"I—" Mallory surrendered to the beseechingly hopeful expression of Lori's face. "Of course. Come in. My name is Mallory, by the way. I'm a friend of David's."

"Glad to meet you," Lori replied, coming inside.

"Would you like something to eat, Lori?" Mallory improvised quickly. "I was about to fix myself a salad."

The mention of food distracted the pretty teenager. Her face cleared. "Oh, sure, thanks. That'd be nice."

Lori trailed Mallory into the kitchen, chattering artlessly the whole time. She was a friendly, confiding girl who obviously liked to talk.

"Of course, it's probably going to be ages before David gets back," she observed, standing on tiptoe to reach a teak salad bowl on an upper cabinet shelf. She set it down on the tiled kitchen counter with a *thunk*. "He gets really wrapped up

in his patients. But I guess you probably know that already, huh? Being his friend, I mean."

"Mmm," Mallory nodded, opening the refrigerator:

"I think it's 'cause of his mother," Lori went on consideringly. "Like maybe he's trying to make up for that other doctor's mistake."

Mallory's head came up. She couldn't hide her surprise. "Mistake?"

"Uh-oh." Guilty distress clouded Lori's blue eyes. "I—you didn't know about that?"

"David told me... he said he decided to become a doctor the same year his mother died," Mallory replied slowly.

"He doesn't talk about it much," Lori said. "He holds things in, you know. I don't know the whole story. But I guess his mother got sick and the doctor she went to didn't diagnose it right. When they finally found out what was really wrong..." her voice trailed off.

Mallory nodded slowly.

"Um..." Lori was chewing her lower lip. "You won't tell David I said anything, will you? I mean, it's not a big secret, but he doesn't like people talking about him. He's really private about some things."

"I won't say anything," Mallory agreed.

"Whew." The teenager smiled gratefully and levered herself up to sit on top of the counter. "David's a pretty neat guy," Lori continued. "In fact, I think—"

"You think what?" Mallory prompted, glancing at the girl.

"Ohmigod!" Lori said in a hushed little voice. Her eyes were fixed on the tattooed angel on Mallory's right wrist.

Mallory's heart sank.

"I *knew* I knew you! You're her!" Lori hopped off the counter and did an excited little jig. "You're Molly V!"

For a moment, Mallory considered denying everything, but the expression on Lori's young face told her such a ploy probably wouldn't work.

"Yes," she said reluctantly. "I'm Molly V."

Lori clapped her hands together. "Oh, wow! I can't believe this—this is *amazing*! I have all your albums. David never said anything. I didn't even know he *knew* you!"

An icy knot formed in Mallory's stomach. "He... David doesn't know he knows Molly V."

"Huh?" The single syllable came out blunt and bewildered. Mallory wondered if she'd been as easy to read at sixteen; she didn't think so. Four unhappy years in foster care had taught her to keep her feelings to herself.

"Boy, is he going to be embarrassed. Just wait till I tell him!"

Mallory caught her breath "I—I wish you wouldn't, Lori."

Lori frowned. "You want to tell him yourself?"

Mallory nodded slowly. "Yes, I want to tell David myself. But I want to do it at the right time... in the right way."

She slanted Mallory a wistfully hopeful, faintly wheedling look. "I—uh—guess I can't tell my friends about you either, can I?"

The corners of Mallory's mouth quirked up. "I don't think that's a very good idea," she confirmed.

"Yeah, probably not. Anyway, they'd never believe me. I mean, Molly V in *Farmington*?"

"Compared with most of the places I've been, Farmington's wonderful."

"You don't think it's boring?"

Mallory smiled. She could hear—and understand—the yearning for excitement in Lori's voice. "Boring is spending eighteen hours straight in a stuffy studio trying to get the vocal track of a song right,"

she said. "It's necessary, but it's boring."

"Yeah, but going on tour! Flying around in a jet, partying—"

"When I go on tour, I go by bus. And when you do two hundred plus one-night stands in two hundred plus days, you don't have much time for partying."

"You—you're not going to quit, are you?" Lori asked.

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do," she told David's half sister after a few seconds.

"Well, you can't quit. You're so good!"

"Thanks. But I don't even have a band anymore."

"Oh... yeah. Rick, Boomer, and Coney—they're all in Nightshade now, huh? With Colin Swann." Lori giggled, her blue eyes sparkling. "I bet *he's* not boring. I think *he's* a hunk!"

"So do a lot of other women."

Lori cocked her head. "Are you and Colin... I mean, I read in some magazine—"

Mallory's expression became serious. "You can't believe most of what you read, Lori."

David came home shortly before seven that evening. Lori had left hours before, her stomach full of three servings of salad and her mind stuffed with Mallory's stories about the real world of rock-and-roll. The teenager repeated her pledge of silence as she was saying goodbye. She also dropped a rather unsubtle hint about Nightshade's upcoming concert appearance in Hartford. Laughing, Mallory promised to see about getting the girl some complimentary tickets—and perhaps even a pair of backstage passes.

Mallory was in the kitchen when she heard the front door open. She'd been luxuriating in the tranquility of the house, mentally indulging in a small fantasy about what it would be like to live in this

place... with David.

He was hanging up his parka when she reached the front hall.

"David?" she said softly.

He turned. His attractive, asymmetrical features held equal parts exhaustion and exhilaration. "You waited." Until that moment, he hadn't allowed himself to realize how much he'd been counting on finding her here when he returned.

"I said I would," she told him. She wanted to erase, the lines in his forehead and relax the tension she read in his lean body. "Is the patient—?"

"He's alive. He isn't out of the woods yet, but the indications are favorable."

"I'm glad," Mallory said.

"So am I." The steady simplicity of the three words held a wealth of carefully controlled emotion.

After a moment Mallory said: "Do you want something—food, maybe?"

"I ate at the hospital. At least I think I remember eating. I could do with a stiff drink, though. I've got a bottle of Scotch in the kitchen—"

"You go into the den and sit down. I'll fix you the drink. Ice?"

"A couple of cubes and a splash of water. Thanks, Mallory."

It took her a few minutes to fix his drink. She collected some crackers and cheese as well before joining him in the den.

"I hope you didn't find it boring, being here by yourself," he said when she sat beside him.

"It wasn't at all boring," she said. "In fact, I had a visitor. Your sister Lori stopped by. She wanted to talk to you. Some kind of fight with her parents. I don't think it was anything too momentous."

"At sixteen, everything's a crisis." He rubbed the back of his neck with his palm. "I'll call her tomorrow. Did she stay long?"

"About two hours."

"Two hours?" His brows went up.

"Do I have any secrets left?"

Mallory laughed. "A few."

"Do *you* have any secrets left?" His voice was teasing, but there was a hint of seriousness running through it."

"A few," she repeated.

"Hmmm."

There was a brief silence, then David reached forward and touched her face, drawing the tip of his forefinger down the line of her cheek with a tenderness that made her tremble. Then his mouth settled over hers, claiming it in a kiss that began as a teasing, tantalizing caress and swiftly deepened to a heated, hungry search. She yielded, then responded to his demand, her lips opening under his.

He seemed bent on absorbing every nuance of the kiss, relishing the sweetness and the quivering cling of her mouth. He explored and incited with his tongue.

"I want to make love with you, Mallory," he told her huskily, his mouth nuzzling a leisurely path up the side of her throat. "I want to learn every silken inch of you. I want to go to sleep with the scent of your perfume filling my brain and wake up with the feel of your body warm against mine. Come to bed with me."

She gave her consent with a kiss.

He brought her upstairs to his bedroom, carrying her with a protective care that made her feel deeply cherished. Setting her down almost reluctantly, he flicked a switch that turned on the lamp next to the bed.

"I want to see you," he explained, his eyes sweeping over her.

They undressed each other with none of the awkwardness of first-time lovers. Their instinctive attunement lent the process an erotic, electric harmony.

Mallory's breath caught at the top of her throat as she took in the tempered,

disciplined strength of his naked body. His hair-roughened legs were long and leanly muscled, and there was an athletic power in his calves and thighs. His hips and buttocks were trim; his chest and broad shoulders beautifully proportioned.

In turn, David celebrated her nudity, his eyes admiring the exquisite lines of her figure. The pearly sheen of her skin and the beckoning ripeness of her body tempted him at the most basic level.

"You are so beautiful," he told her in a hushed tone, as they settled on the bed.

His hands flowed over her like heated water, warming and sensitizing her skin so that the merest brush of his fingers sent ripples of pleasure running along her nerve endings. She arched in restless, receptive desire as he sought out her most intimate secrets with gentle, skillful hands. He stroked and teased, kindling a fire that raced from the center of her womanhood to the tips of her fingers and toes.

She released a soft, whimpering cry, his name escaping her lips in a shaky exhalation.

"David, please—" she pleaded, her palms coasting up over the muscled firmness of his back.

Finally, he shifted up and over her, his mouth swooping down to devour hers with voluptuous hunger as he completed the union they both desperately wanted.

Mallory chanted his name in yearning urgency without even realizing she was doing so. Her eyelids fluttered open suddenly and she looked up into his taut-featured face. He was gazing down at her, watching the eloquently revealing play of expressions on her face with rapt male concentration. For one stunning moment, Mallory thought she could see herself reflected in the blazing depths of his eyes.

A moment later, she was swept beyond rational thought, hurtling into an ex-

perience so piercingly sweet, so profoundly elemental, that she was afraid she might faint. David followed her off the brink, groaning his pleasure as he took his own ecstatic release.

The next morning they eventually got up and showered together. Any water they might have saved by taking one shower instead of two was more than offset by the length of time they lingered beneath the warm, gushing spray.

Once they dried each other off, they dressed and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. After a call to the hospital drew the assurance that the emergency case of the day before was more than holding his own, they drove to Mallory's condominium so she could get a change of clothes.

"Is this yours?" David asked when she emerged from her bedroom. He was standing by the piano, studying a partially completed sheet of handwritten music. He'd been picking out the notes quietly, trying to get a feel for the melody. He gave Mallory an interested, inquiring smile.

In the past, Mallory had always stubbornly refused to let people hear her compositions before they were polished to her satisfaction. It was an idiosyncrasy that had both amused and annoyed the other members of Fallen Angel, but they'd excused and accepted it on the grounds of creative temperament. Oddly enough, she didn't mind David's playing her unfinished song now.

"It's just something I've been fooling around with," she told him.

"Is it a ballad?" David asked. There'd been a haunting lilt to the notes he'd been playing.

"It could be. I'm never quite sure how my songs are going to turn out." She made a ruefully funny face. "It's a little like having children, I guess. Do you—do you play?"

He spread his hands, holding them palms up. "I can read music to a point and hit the right keys about eighty percent of the time, but I think it would be pushing things to say I actually play. My mother insisted I take lessons the year I turned ten. I think my teacher finally convinced her I was a lost cause."

"My dad taught me," Mallory said after a pause. "My mother played folk guitar. Before... before they died, we used to play together. It was—I liked it a lot." For a moment, her brown eyes were achingly full of memories.

"How old were you when your parents died?" David asked quietly, responding to the vulnerability he read in her face.

She plucked at the fringed ends of her belt for a second. "Twelve," she said flatly. "There was a car accident."

"What happened to you?"

"Afterward, you mean? I was put in foster homes. I didn't have any close relatives, and people don't usually like to adopt older kids. So I lived with a bunch of different families until I graduated from high school." She gave a little shrug. "That was a long time ago, though. It wasn't so bad."

It wasn't so good, either, David added silently, sensing the hurt she was doing her best to cover up.

He came near and put his arm around her. "Let's go—we still have shopping to do."

"Neon-blue earrings and an electric-green sweat-shirt dress," David mused aloud later as they finished their late lunch and headed back into the mall. "Are you sure we aren't being too conservative?"

"Don't worry, David. Lori will love the birthday presents."

The mall was even more crowded than it had been before they'd stopped for lunch. People were thronging in either to take advantage of final, end-of-winter

clearance sales or to check out the latest spring-summer merchandise. David slipped a companionable arm around Mallory's waist as they walked along, his hand resting casually against her hip.

Mallory had had some anxieties about this shopping trip. The thought of going out among so many people had made her feel uncomfortably vulnerable. She stopped suddenly, realizing where he was heading. "Oh, you're not getting Lori a record, are you?" she asked, her body tightening again.

David halted, too. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Trying not to panic at the idea, Mallory searched for a suitable way of diverting him from his destination. "It—I—it's just not a very original thought," she said lamely.

Her obvious nervousness puzzled him. He took her arm. "Original or not, it's what she wants."

"But I can't—"

"You can." Forcefully he steered her into the record store. Mallory was helpless to protest.

"Here we are," David said. "Rock, rock, and more rock."

"Here we are," Mallory echoed faintly. She allowed herself to be pulled toward the bins where the rock records were stored.

Afterward, she asked herself if things might have gone differently if they'd begun at the end of the alphabet instead of the beginning.

She was flipping methodically through the C albums when she felt the eyes. Stomach tightening, she looked up. She swiftly realized that the source of her instinctive uneasiness was a knot of five or six teenagers standing about ten feet away. They were staring at her, whispering excitedly and pointing.

Oh, no, she thought desperately dropping her eyes. Her heart was pounding.

Her worst fears were being realized—or almost her worst fears.

David was now standing at the record bin next to her, going through the albums there with a mixture of interest and appalled amusement. Where in heaven's name do they find these people? he wondered. And who comes up with—

At that moment he froze. Sitting at the front of the collection of F albums was a number of recordings by a group called Fallen Angel. The name rang a faint bell. The picture on the front of an album entitled "Tumble to Earth" did more than that.

The cover was a smoky-toned, full-length portrait of a woman who seemed to be part enchantress, part streetwise urchin. The woman in the portrait was Mallory Victor. But the name on the record jacket read Molly V.

"This is you, isn't it, Mallory?" David asked in a taut voice, holding the album.

David's tone brought her up short, driving her concern about being recognized by the teenagers right out of her mind. She looked at him apprehensively, searching for words. David was staring at her as though he were seeing her for the first time... and not quite liking what he saw.

"David—" She bit her lip painfully, damning the betraying album cover. Of all the ways she'd envisioned David learning the truth about her, this certainly had not been one of them!

"Or should I say *Molly*?" There was a slashing emphasis on the last word.

Things happened with an almost frightening rapidity after that. In what seemed like a matter of seconds, Mallory was surrounded by a throng of fans. They were eager, enthusiastic, and encroaching, trapping her against the record bin as they called out questions, asked for autographs, and reached forward to touch her.

Still off balance from the shock of his

discovery, David found himself shoved aside in the first moments of madness. But, even in the confusion, he never lost sight of Mallory or her transformation in the middle of her fans. It was a subtle but palpable thing. In the space of a few seconds, Mallory Victor altered the way she held herself, tilted her head, pitched her voice. She became a different woman... a stranger.

Mallory got through the next half hour on automatic pilot. she signed, she smiled, she shook her head to the too-personal questions and the requests for a song. It was an expert, experienced performance that would have pleased Bernie McGillis if he'd seen it. It might even have convinced Mallory herself if she hadn't felt the need to seek out David with her eyes every few minutes. It was as though she were a compass needle and he were the magnetic North Pole. He gave her a sense of being able to keep her bearings.

The tenth or eleventh time she glanced over toward the spot where he had taken position—watching, waiting—he was no longer there. Shaken, she looked around. She couldn't find him.

"Ma'am?" a guard addressed her politely.

Startled, Mallory looked up from the record cover she was signing. Now what? she asked herself.

"Your car is waiting," the guard said.

"Car—?" Her rented car was parked back at her borrowed condominium.

"Dr. Hitch—"

"Oh!" In an instant, she was Mallory Victor again.

Despite the very vocal protests of the remaining crowd, the guards extricated her from the record shop and hustled her through the mall with more speed than ceremony.

David was waiting for her in his car. It was parked next to the curb with the motor running. As she came out into the

sunlight, he leaned across the front seat and opened the door on the passenger's side. After a few words of thanks to the guards, she got in and shut the door.

"Thank you," she said as he shifted gears and pulled away.

"You're a true performer... Mallory."

The compliment—if it was that—was double-edged. The pause before her name was equally cutting. "David, I was going to tell—"

"I bought your latest album. You'll have to autograph it for Lori."

Her stomach started to churn. "She already has it," she said unwisely.

David took his eyes off the road for a moment, pinning her to her seat.

"Lori knows who you are?" The quicksilver flashes in his eyes turned to ice. He knew it was stupid to feel so angry, but he couldn't help himself.

"David—" Somehow, she had to explain.

"Leave it until we get to your place," he bit out.

They made the rest of the drive in silence.

"Why didn't you tell me, Mallory. Or is it really *Molly*?"

She had taken up refuge in the corner of the modular sofa arrangement in the living room of the condominium. David was standing about five feet away.

"Mallory Victor is my real name. I'm known professionally as Molly V. And I didn't tell you because I was afraid."

David stopped pacing, feeling as though he'd been slapped across the face. "You were afraid?" he echoed in disbelief. "You were afraid of *me*?"

"Of how you'd react if—when—you found out."

Her words stunned him.

"Look, I can accept your not wanting to say anything at the beginning. I mean,

'oh, by the way, I'm a rock star' isn't exactly something you can just casually toss into a conversation with someone you've barely met. But later! After we got to know each other...after we made love—"

"You don't understand," she said.

Closing the physical distance between them in three swift strides, David sat down beside her. The expression on his craggily featured face was fierce.

"Then help me to understand, Mallory," he urged intensely. He tightened his grip. "I want to understand. Damn it, I *need* to understand. Don't be afraid of me... please."

She looked at him. "You know, in some ways, I think you understand me better than anyone else," she said. "But in others... how could you? We're from two different worlds."

"The doctor and the rock star?" His tone had softened slightly.

"Something like that," she nodded. "I—after my parents were killed, I felt totally alone. It didn't seem as if anybody wanted me or loved me. I didn't have *anything*... except music. That was mine. I was good at it, even back then."

David heard both pride and pain in her voice. "So?" he prompted.

"So... I decided to use it. I decided to become a star—somebody everybody would want and love." Her eyes clouded. "God, it all seemed so simple."

"Mallory, I'm sorry," he said. "But all this—I still don't understand why you were afraid to tell me about Molly V."

"I thought you'd be... horrified about my image and if people found out, you'd have reporters crawling all over you."

Dropping her eyes, Mallory drew a deep steadying breath. David wanted to reach out and take her in his arms, but he held back, sensing she had more to say.

"I am Molly V, yes," she went on. "But that's only part of who I am. Most

people can't—or won't—get beyond that. They react to the image—the mask—not to me. And that's why I didn't tell you, David. I—I didn't want Molly V to get in the way. I wanted you to know Mallory Victor first."

There was a long silence. Finally, Mallory looked up. The expression of David's blue-gray eyes held understanding and warmth.

"David?" she whispered wonderingly. He was looking at her—*her!*—with such tenderness...

"You and I want the same thing," he told her simply. "I do know Mallory Victor... now."

There was nothing more to say—at least not then. And there was no reason for him to hold back from taking her in his arms and showing her how well he knew her... and how much he cherished what he knew.

After a report about the record store incident appeared in the local newspaper the next day, two reporters called David at his office. When one of them became especially rude, David hung up. When he left for the day, he shrugged off the sharply curious look he got from his receptionist with a muttered, "We're just good friends."

He mentioned what was going on to Mallory that night, but he made light of the situation, making the calls sound more amusing than irritating.

The next day, a stringer from UPI appeared on his doorstep along with a freelance photographer. David played deaf when a reporter fired off a list of highly personal questions. He was nearly blinded when the photographer popped a flashbulb in his face.

After his vision cleared, he trenchantly informed the pair that they were on private property. He then proceeded to persuade them that he was definitely

serious about having them both hauled off for trespassing.

He took a long and circuitous route when he drove to see Mallory that night. Part of him felt like a paranoid fool for doing so. The rest of him was relieved that no one followed him.

They spent the weekend at the condominium. There were no reporters... no ringing telephones.

It was just the two of them. And it seemed perfect.

But there were reporters and photographers waiting for him when he reached his office on Monday morning, all of them clamoring to know the details of his weekend rendezvous with Molly V.

"How does it feel to be Molly V's latest?"

"How did you meet her, Doc?"

David lost his temper. "In the fruit section of the supermarket!" he snapped.

As soon as Mallory let him in that night and saw his face, she knew her estimation that he wouldn't like the experience of going through the media meat grinder had been pitifully optimistic. He looked furious.

He thrust a folded newspaper at her. "Something for your scrapbook," he announced.

The front page of the tabloid was as bad as she expected. It was a cut and paste composite photograph of the two of them. The picture of her was several years old. She wondered if the one of David dated from his appearance at the White House. She let the newspaper drop to the floor.

David glared at her. "A picture is worth a thousand words, hmm?" he asked furiously. "In case you're interested, I'm either supposed to be the lover who replaced Colin Swann or the dedicated doctor who cured you of some rare

disease.”

Brushing by her, he stalked into the living room. He honestly didn't trust himself to be too close to her at this moment.

He could *feel* her following behind him. Angry as he was, he was still conscious of her subtle, seductive scent and he could visualize the graceful way—

“David,” Mallory began, struggling with a sense of guilt and hurt. “David, I'm so sorry. I tried to tell you—”

He turned on her. “Yes, you did try to tell me,” he agreed. “But I, the good Lord help me, thought you were exaggerating. You said reporters would be crawling all over me if people found out about us, if I recall. Well, they have been.”

“David—” she put a hand on his arm.

He shook it off. It was time to be totally honest. “I told you I decided to become a doctor when I was fourteen. The year my mother died. What I didn't tell you was that she died because her doctor—someone she trusted and depended on—diagnosed her incorrectly. And then he prescribed the wrong treatment. If he'd caught it in time. . . But her doctor had personal problems, you see. He had his mind on something other than medicine. I know this because my father brought a malpractice suit against the doctor after my mother died, and everything came out. . . all of it.”

There was a pause. Mallory bit her lip. She knew, with painful clarity, why David was telling her this.

“I knew I wanted to be a doctor before my mother's death,” he went on finally. “After it, I knew what *kind* I wanted to be.”

“The kind who doesn't let his personal life interfere with his professional one,” she whispered.

“Yes.” The anger had gone out of him. In its place was a wrenching, tearing pain.

Mallory was very pale. “You must hate

me,” she said.

The four words hit him like a body blow. “*Hate you?*” he repeated. “Mallory, don't you see I *love* you.”

The truth of his feelings burst forth; he flung the words like an accusation. Whether he was accusing her or himself, Mallory didn't know. Neither did he.

“You. . . love. . . me?” she asked, taking two steps away from him. The backs of her legs nudged a chair. She sat down, shaking.

David looked at her, devouring her with his eyes. He ached at the pain he saw in her face. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was hurt this woman and yet he had done just that. . . and he was going to continue doing it.

He crossed to her and knelt down, taking her hands almost just the way he had the day he discovered she was Molly V.

“David—” She touched the back of his head gently, her fingertips registering the crisply vital texture of his thick, brown-blond hair. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. “David, I love you, too,” she said. “When we're together for the first time in a long, long time. . . I feel like I am home.”

“Oh, Mallory. . . Mallory. . . if it was just the two of us, I'd say damn the publicity and the press and everything else. I'd say marry me or live with me. . . *be* with me for the rest of our lives.”

“You—marry you?” Mallory knew she was being given a gift she needed and wanted. She also knew that gift was going to be snatched away. Unless. . .

He nodded. “Yes. But it's not just the two of us, and we both know it. You once said we were from two different worlds—”

“The doctor and the rock star.”

“The doctor and the rock star,” he agreed, sandwiching her hands between his palms. “Mallory, I love you. I love *you*. But this—the rest. . .”

Mallory took a deep breath. "Supposing Molly V quit?" she asked. "Do you think the doctor and the ex-rock star could get together if they lived in the same world?"

"You want to quit?" Bernie's voice was so soft Mallory had to strain to hear what he was saying.

"Yes." Mallory glanced over at David. They were still in the living room of the condominium. She was curled up in the corner of the sofa with the phone cradled between her chin and shoulder; he was sitting a few feet away. They'd talked long and hard before she'd made this call, but they'd both agreed it seemed to be the only way.

"Why?"

"I've already told you. At least four times."

"You think you're in love with this Dr. David Hitchcock and you're going to marry him."

"I don't *think*; I know. I've known in my heart for a long time. This is what I—we—want."

"So just what is it you want from me? My blessing?"

"I thought you could help handle the announcement. You *are* still my manager."

"I'll—a press release isn't going to cover this, babe."

"Why not?"

"Mallory, you know as well as I do the rumors that have been floating around since Bobby died. If you suddenly up and retire, I can guarantee you you'll have reporters digging around until doomsday to get the real story. That Hitchcock's a doctor doesn't help."

"What do you think I should do, then? Call a news conference?" Her distaste for the idea was clear from her tone. She saw David's brows come together.

"Well... what about doing a good-bye

gig? Going out in style? Let everybody see Molly V's quitting at the top because she wants to, not because she's freaked out, or broken down, or cracked up."

Mallory turned the notion over in her brain. It had a definite appeal. It *would* be a classy exit, she thought. And Molly V—*she*—deserved that. She might not like some of the things her career as a rock queen had done to her, but she was proud of her musical accomplishments.

She looked at David. She wanted him to be proud of those accomplishments, too.

"How long would this take to put together, Bernie?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact... Nightshade is coming to Hartford this weekend. Do it with them."

Nightshade! She'd completely forgotten about that. To perform with Coney, Boomer, Rick... and Colin... again — yes, that would be something special.

"Would they mind?" she asked.

"Mind? Hell, no. They'd welcome you back with open arms. I'm not saying this first tour of theirs isn't going well, but you know how first tours are. A little bit of the old Molly V magic wouldn't hurt. It'd be good for you and good for them."

"Set it up, Bernie," she said.

"Mallory, are you absolutely sure about this?" David asked many hours later, as they lay together in bed.

"I'm sure," she told him, reaching up to trace the crease along the left side of his mouth. "Aren't you?"

"Oh, yes." Turning his head slightly, he nipped at the tip of her finger. "I'm sure."

She shivered voluptuously as she felt his free hand stroke her torso.

"The rock world's loss is definitely your gain," she told him, skiing her nails lightly down his neck and chest.

For some reason he couldn't understand, much less put into words, the

remark bothered David.

"I appreciate what I've got," he replied quietly, and covered her soft, rosy lips with his.

But somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if he really did.

"I am going to die," Lori Hitchcock declared in a burst of adolescent overstatement as she trailed Mallory and David into the Hartford Civic Center four days later. "I am really going to die."

"If you die now," Mallory said reasonably, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling, "you won't get to meet Swann."

"Colin Swann. Ohmigod." For a moment, Lori seemed on the verge of hyperventilation. Her blue eyes were the size of pie plates and her short curly hair seemed to be standing on end. "Do I look okay?"

"Lori, you look terrific," Mallory said. "Trust me. In fact—"

"Molly! Babe!"

This enthusiastic but faintly harried salutation came from a slightly overweight, balding man in his fifties who looked as though he'd crawled into his clothes after spending the night sleeping on top of them.

"Bernie!" Mallory flashed a brilliant smile as Bernie hustled over.

"David, I'd like you to meet Bernie McGillis, my manager," Mallory said. "Bernie, this is Dr. David Hitchcock and his sister, Lori."

The two men shook hands.

"Is everything okay, Bernie?" Mallory asked.

"Yeah, yeah. Just the usual headaches. You know how it is. Look, the guys are all inside waiting—"

"Lead the way."

Following Bernie, they walked into chaos. Controlled, constructive chaos, to be sure, but chaos nonetheless.

"My God," David muttered under his breath as an ear-splitting shriek of feedback screamed out of a massive bank of speakers to his left. He'd seen hospital emergency rooms that were oases of calm compared with this.

The arena where the Nightshade concert was to be held was huge, and it was crawling with people. People yelling. People screaming. People hammering, hanging lights, and moving things around.

"Hey-hey-hey! Moll—ee!"

Mallory turned around. "Swann!"

"Hello, Mallory."

They embraced. While they did, David took a good look at Colin Swann, the memory of the tabloid story he had read less than a week before stabbing at him with unexpected sharpness.

Colin Swann was in his mid-thirties. He was pantherlean with pitch-black hair and light gray, almost silvery, eyes set under dark, distinctive brows. He kissed Mallory on the cheek before letting her go.

"It's good to see you again, babe," he told her.

Mallory nodded. "It's good to see you, too," she said sincerely. "I want you to meet my . . . friend . . . Dr. David Hitchcock." For a moment, she wished she hadn't gone along with Bernie's suggestion that she keep her plans with David under wraps until they'd worked out all the details of her retirement announcement. "David, this is Colin Swann."

"Mr. Swann," David said.

"Dr. Hitchcock," Swann acknowledged with a cutting smile.

"And this is David's sister Lori," Mallory went on with a slight but significant lift of her brows.

Swann picked up the hint and turned his smile and his silver eyes on the plainly awestruck teenager. Lori melted under the impact of his charm like a popsicle in a heat wave. "Nice to meet you, Lori."

"It is?" Lori asked. She swallowed several times, opened her mouth to speak again, then shut it. Mallory and David exchanged faintly amused looks. It was a rare situation that could render Lori speechless.

"Look, I hate to break up all this chit-chat," Bernie cut in sharply. "But don't you think you should try to get in a little rehearsal time? This is going to be an important gig tonight."

Mallory looked at David apologetically. "This shouldn't take too long—" she began, torn between a desire to share everything with him and her ingrained professionalism. She wondered what he was making of all this . . . and of her part in it. She hadn't missed his reaction when he'd first come into the arena.

"I'll be here when you get back," he told her.

"I can't believe this," Lori said as Mallory and Bernie walked swiftly away. "Is this amazing or what, David?"

"It's amazing," he agreed, still watching Mallory.

Several hours later, Mallory looked in the mirror of her dressing room and Molly V looked back. Her dark hair had been brushed to a sensuous wildness—untamed, but definitely touchable. Smoky shadows, smudged liner and five coats of black mascara lent a come-hither emphasis to her eyes. A ripe, rose-wine lipstick turned her mouth into an invitation.

Her outfit was similar to the one she'd worn in the days before she'd made it big: a black, tight-fitting jacket with the Fallen Angel motif embroidered on it, and a short black skirt.

"Molly!" Her manager's voice came through the door. "Show time."

She walked to the door of the dressing room and opened it.

"I've got one of the security guys keeping an eye on your doctor," Bernie said. "You just think about getting on, getting

off, and getting it right."

She looked at him. "I know what I have to do."

Ninety seconds later, she went out and did it.

What she did was a revelation to David. It was the transformation in the record store magnified to the tenth power and backed by a talent that took his breath away. He'd heard her sing on her albums—even once or twice at the condo during the past few days—but this . . . *this* was something entirely different.

She was entirely different.

Or maybe she had always been this way, but he'd been too caught up in his feelings to see it.

She looked so right up there. So vibrantly beautiful. Whether she possessed the music or it possessed her, David wasn't certain, but her control was absolute. She brought the audience to its feet, screaming, with one song, then soothed them to a hushed silence with the next.

God, how arrogant he'd been! He'd talked about *his* work, *his* career, *his* professional life—what about hers? He'd been ready to let her sacrifice . . . everything.

The doctor and the rock star. They were from two different worlds.

Backstage afterward, it was madness.

David was so caught up in his own turbulent thoughts that he didn't immediately realize that Bernie McGillis had appeared by his elbow. When he finally did, he turned, his blue-gray eyes distinctly questioning behind his glasses.

"Yes?" he replied.

Bernie smiled fleetingly. "I'm glad you got backstage okay. Mallory's going to be a while. Why don't we go to her dressing room? You can wait for her there. It's a lot less crowded and a lot more private. I mean, nobody's picked up on your being here yet, but—" He shrugged, his voice

trailing off significantly.

"Mallory—?"

"She'll be okay, Doc. She's a pro."

The door to Mallory's dressing room was labeled MOLLY V and bore a gold star. Bernie nodded casually at the uniformed security guard sitting next to it as he let himself and David inside.

"What did you think of the concert?"

Bernie asked, when they both sat down.

"I thought Mallory was remarkable," he said finally. "I've never been much of a fan of rock music—"

"Yeah, I hear you didn't recognize her at first."

"I didn't," David replied. "And... I didn't realize what she was going to be like tonight."

"She's something special on-stage."

"She's something special off-stage, too."

"Mmm. Maybe too special," Bernie remarked reflectively.

David stiffened. "What does that mean?"

The manager held up his hand placatingly. "Hey, I'm not trying to be offensive, Doc—David, if I may." He grimaced. "I get told I'm offensive without trying, if you can believe that. But... you love her, am I right?"

"Yes," he said tersely.

"And she obviously loves you. That's what this whole quitting number is all about."

David looked at him squarely. "Mr. McGillis, why don't you make your point?"

"Look, you apparently can't live with Mallory's career. I understand that. The press, the pressure—it could very well eat you alive. The point is: After what you saw tonight, do you think Mallory can live without it?"

Nearly an hour later, Mallory stood in

front of her dressing room door. The post-performance exhilaration had faded, leaving only a sense of satisfying exhaustion. She felt drained...almost numb.

She'd given all she had to give out there tonight. She'd held nothing back. No matter what people said about her after this, they'd have to admit she'd made a classy exit.

And now all she wanted to do was to go home. With David. If she didn't keel over flat on her face first.

She gave the security guard a weary smile, then opened the door and walked in. David looked up as she entered and did the only thing he could in that moment. He stood up and opened his arms to her.

She came to him, shoes thudding on the floor in her wake, her jacket slipping off her shoulders. She leaned against him for a long moment, feeling his strength.

"Mallory—" His voice was low, rumbling in his chest beneath her cheek.

She raised her mouth to him, lips parted, her arms going up around his neck and her body molding itself to his.

He was selfish then, kissing her with a fierce, devouring, almost angry passion. The fingers of one of his hands wove thorough the silken tangle of her hair. The fingers of the other left a fiery path as they trailed down the naked skin of her back to cup her buttocks.

She emerged from the embrace more than a little shaken. Something... something had changed. As tired as she was, she could sense it in the way he'd touched her... in the way he was looking at her now.

"I thought you were incredible out there tonight," he told her at last.

"You—you did?"

"I had no idea what you were like on-stage," he said. "What you could do with your music."

She shook her head once, trying to

draw on energy reserves that had long since been depleted. "I wanted you to be..." For some reason, the word proud stuck in her throat. "I wanted you to understand."

"I understand, Mallory," he replied. "Part of me wishes I didn't. But I do understand... now."

The knot of ice in the pit of her stomach was developing some very sharp, very nasty edges. She licked her lips, twisting a lock of hair around one finger. "Now... now I'm the one who doesn't understand," she said.

"Yes, I think you do."

She stared at him. It isn't supposed to be like this, she thought. It isn't!

"Mallory, you belong in the spotlight."

"I thought I belonged with you," she said, speaking the words as though they might break.

The hurt in her voice tore at David, but he told himself that a measure of hurt was necessary for both of them now to save them from overwhelming anguish later.

David put his hands on her shoulders. His palms seemed very warm against her bare skin. "Mallory, I saw what you did to that audience tonight. There were moments when people practically stopped breathing, you were so good."

A shudder ran through her. She was only dimly conscious of the passionate sincerity in his voice.

David's grip tightened for a fraction of a second. "Look, you can say what you want about Molly V and your image and all the rest of that, but it was you, Mallory—your talent, your music, your ambition, *you*—that people were responding to out there. I was responding to you, too. And when you can make people respond like that—"

"You don't want me to quit, do you, David?" she interrupted. A part of her mind was shouting that she should be

screaming, protesting—*reacting*.

"Not for me—no. To give all that up—" He gestured toward the door... toward the stage and the spotlight and the audience.

She opened her mouth to tell him how little he knew about "all that," then shut it again.

She said the only thing she thought mattered, "David, I love you."

His beautifully made doctor's hands—man's hands, lover's hands—clenched once. "For how long?" he asked, his voice flat and tight. "If you quit to marry me, how long would it be before you started to think about tonight? About what you did and the way it made you feel?"

"You said you loved me," she said, evading his question and its implications.

"I do. But it wouldn't work," he said shaking his head. "We're just too far apart. You said it yourself once—"

"We're from two different worlds," she completed in a colorless voice. The doctor and the rock star. She took a deep breath.

The gutsiness that had carried her through so much started to assert itself. Mallory Victor had scars, yes. There would be fresh ones now on top of the old. But she had strengths, too. Strengths she was only starting to recognize.

"Mallory—" David stopped. Even as he watched, she was drawing herself up, tossing back her hair. It was less than the transformation in the record store and only a shadowy hint of what he'd seen tonight, but he could see her changing.

"Tonight was supposed to be Molly V's good-bye gig," she said in a tone of decision. "It will have to do as the launch for her comeback."

Two and a half weeks later, David Hitchock sat in his office, staring unseeingly at the walnut-paneled, diploma-hung wall

opposite his desk. He had given up any pretense of reading through the patient files his nurse had put out for him before she'd gone home for the night.

He'd been in his office, alone, for more than an hour, and the only thing he'd read was an article in the latest edition of *Rolling Stone*. The article was a glowing review of the Nightshade national tour and its recently added special guest star Molly V. There was a black-and-white picture of Mallory Victor and Colin Swann singing together in the spotlight next to the article.

The picture showed Mallory smiling. David could even see the tiny chip in her front tooth. She looked happy.

The digital clock on the bookshelf next to his desk hummed softly and clicked off the passage of another minute. David blinked. It was nearly seven. He should be going home.

Only what would he be going home to? A stack of medical journals he wasn't going to read. And memories of Mallory he wouldn't be able to forget, no matter how hard he tried.

She would have stayed, a small voice inside his head reminded him insinuatingly. She was ready to stay.

Oh, yes, she'd been ready to stay. She'd been ready to give up her career for him. But he'd seen what that career meant to her—what she gave to it and got in return. He'd had to let her go.

But, dammit, it had been hard! And it was getting harder with each passing day.

He looked down again at the picture in *Rolling Stone*, his index finger moving to trace the outline of Mallory's face. She still looked happy.

Mallory was miserable. Being on the road wasn't as bad as she remembered; it was worse. The glimpse of rock-and-roll reality she'd tried to give Lori Hitchcock during lunch the first time they'd met now

seemed positively romanticized.

Maybe it was her emotional rawness following the break with David that made the maddening tedium of touring—seeing the same people, singing the same songs, answering the same questions—seem such a soul-grinding, energy-sapping experience.

The backstage dressing room where she was sitting now seemed to be the size of a Cracker Jack box, only she wasn't very much of a prize at the moment. Her vocal chords felt as though they'd been ripped out and replaced by barbed wire. As so often happened on tour, the band and road crews had been passing around a variety of germs, including a particularly miserable cold bug. In Mallory's case, the virus had gone for the throat.

In a strange way, she welcomed the physical discomfort. At least it was temporary and could be treated. . . . unlike the emotional pain with which she was trying to cope.

Maybe I should call a doctor, she thought. But the doctor she needed was hundreds of miles away.

There was a sharp rap at the door. "Mallory?"

It was Swann. Even if she hadn't recognized his voice, she would have known who it was by the use of her real name.

He entered and crossed to a chair a few feet away from her, turned it around, and straddled it. "Do you feel as lousy as you look?" he inquired conversationally.

Mallory managed a strangled laugh. "Have you been taking charm lessons?"

"Do you?" he pressed.

For some reason, she suddenly thought of a magazine cover she'd glimpsed at the hotel newsstand when they'd checked in. It had had a picture of her and Swann. She wondered if David had seen it. She hoped not.

"Maybe what I need is some of that no-

strings sex you're so famous for," she said with an edge of bitter bravado. "After all, we're supposed to be—"

"Yeah, I saw the magazine, too, Mallory. Sure, I could make love to you and make you feel a little less lonely for a couple of hours. But you and I both know that isn't what you need."

Mallory closed her eyes, feeling more than a little sick.

"Mallory, what are you doing here?" Swann asked after a few seconds.

She opened her eyes. "I belong here," she said, consciously rejecting the idea even as she said it.

"Says who?" His voice was cutting.

She sighed. "Bernie."

"Bernie's your manager. I don't deny you're more to him than just a ten percent meal ticket, but he's hardly what I'd call an objective observer."

"I... I was going to quit, you know," she said after almost a minute. "In Hartford. That—it was supposed to be my good-bye gig. David and I..." She bit her lip. "I was going to quit."

Swann's expression didn't change. "What happened?"

Mallory spread her hands. What happened was exactly what she had been afraid would happen. "Molly V, I guess."

There was another pause.

"Why do you always talk about Molly V like a separate person."

"I feel that way most of the time."

"Mallory, you are Molly V. Oh, you put on a little trash and flash to entice the ticket buyers, sure, but it's still you."

She opened her mouth on an instinctive protest, then shut it again.

Look, you can say what you want about Molly V and your image and all the rest of that, but it was you, Mallory—your talent, your music, your ambition, you—that people were responding to out there. I was responding

to you, too.

Mallory caught her breath. David had said those words to her. She'd heard them... but had she understood?

Maybe David hadn't been looking at his friend and lover and seeing the star and celebrity. Maybe he had simply been seeing the whole woman—something *she* apparently hadn't been doing.

Her talent. Her music. Her ambition.

Her life!

"Mallory?" Swann asked.

She smiled slowly, the weariness and despondency that had been enveloping her falling away like an outgrown cocoon. In their place she felt the dawning of a new sense of inner sureness and completion.

"It's time for me to stop letting everybody else tell me where *I* belong," she said.

"Have you heard from her?" Lori asked David several nights later as she painstakingly rearranged the food on her plate with her fork.

The teenager had shown up on David's doorstep about an hour and a half before, announcing that she needed advice on some unspecified personal problem. She'd then chattered on about everything but personal matters and shamelessly wangled an invitation to stay to eat.

"David?" Lori prompted.

He looked at her young, concerned face. "No," he said quietly. "I haven't heard from Mallory. Have you?"

Lori shook her head, poking at her congealing pasta as though it weren't quite dead. "I hope she's okay," she said glumly.

David felt a prickle of alarm. He stiffened. "Why shouldn't she be? The papers—"

"You can't believe everything you read, David," Lori said with a strange inflection. Her tone made his brows come

together. Looking up from her plate, she saw his expression. "Mallory said that to me once," she explained. "The day I met her. But I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"What it's like," she responded with maddening adolescent ambiguity. "Being a rock star, I mean. Like, I figured Mallory rode on jets and in limousines. But she doesn't. She rides on a bus. I guess it's pretty nice, except Mallory said that after a couple of weeks on the road, she feels like the walls are closing in on her. And sometimes she has to be on tour for months."

David set down his fork. Lori's pronouncement of the last word triggered a very unpleasant reaction in him. "What else did Mallory say?" he asked slowly.

"Well, she's been all over the country about a dozen times and she's hardly seen any of it. And she has this house in L.A., but she's hardly seen it, either. I think she feels bad about that. She said it's mostly a tax deduction, not a home."

David nodded.

"And people are always after her, you know? Like when the reporters were after you for a couple of days, only much worse. I guess the music is still good for her. But all the other stuff. . . I think she was thinking about quitting it when she came here to Farmington. Then she met you, huh?"

The question was lobbed out very gently and very tentatively, like someone tossing a rock into a mine field.

"Then she met me," David agreed quietly.

"Are you sure about this?" Bernie McGills asked Mallory.

They were standing backstage at Madison Square Garden. Out front, a capacity crowd was roaring its approval on the first set of the last concert of the Nightshade tour.

In two songs, Swann would make an introduction, and then the crowd would be roaring for *her*.

Mallory smiled and nodded. "Yes, I'm very sure," she said.

"I only want what's best for you," her manager said.

"I know that. I only want what's best for me, too. And this is it."

"Quitting?"

"Yes."

"Are you quitting because of David Hitchcock?" There was a strange note in her manager's voice.

"No. I'm quitting because of *me*. I still love David, Bernie. I think I always will, no matter what. And if there's some way to work it out, I want to make a life with him."

"And if there's not?"

She'd thought about that. The possibility saddened her and even scared her a little, but she knew she would be able to deal with it. "I won't go back on the road," she said. "I won't go back to living my life . . . *my* life . . . in pieces."

Bernie nodded slowly, obviously wrestling with some decision. On stage, Nightshade was playing the opening chords of the song that preceded her introduction.

"Mallory—" Bernie put his hand on her arm.

But Swann was already starting to introduce her.

"Don't worry about me," she said, leaning forward to brush a kiss on his cheek. "I'm going to be fine. This time I really know what I have to do."

Mallory went through a lot of memories and a lot of silent good-byes as she stood out in the spotlight during the next forty-five minutes. She sang all the familiar songs, making them as fresh and as whole as she felt.

She sang for Bobby Donovan and Ber-

nie McGillis and for the nameless drunk in New Jersey who had once led a chant that made her feel special. She sang for Coney, Rick, and Boomer, who had once made her feel as if she had a family again.

She sang for Swann, still not completely sure what was going on behind those silvery eyes of his.

She sang for David and Lori and for the audience she could feel watching and listening in the darkness.

And she sang for herself. Most of all, she sang for herself . . . and for the sheer pleasure of making music.

Two hours later, when she opened the door to her hotel room, she found David sitting on the bed. She had the feeling he had been sitting there for a long time, waiting. She had the feeling the wait hadn't been easy.

He got up slowly. Her door key slipped from nerveless fingers as she got her first look at David Hitchcock in more than a month.

"You look awful," she whispered, even as she was drinking in and rejoicing over every feature in his beloved face. He was thinner and there were painfully unfamiliar lines of stress and sleeplessness around his eyes and mouth. The compassion, the intelligence, the gentleness, she had fallen in love with were still there. But there was a new vulnerability as well.

"You don't," he responded quietly. She had lost some weight, yes, and she looked tired, but there was a serenity about her that he had never seen before. And the contradictions he had sensed in their first meeting were gone, too. "You look beautiful."

"Oh, David." And she opened her arms to him.

He came to her, embracing her, adoring her, trying to communicate wordlessly all the things he had to say to her. His body was warm and strong and male

against hers.

"Why are you here, David?" Mallory asked finally, pulling back a little.

He released her, shutting his mind to the desire surging through him. "I'm here because I want to try to put things right between us, Mallory. Because I need to put them right. I've made so many mistakes, so many misjudgments about you . . . about *myself*—"

"What do you mean?"

"When I came here tonight, I didn't know what I was going to see when you walked through the door. I didn't know if it was going to be the smiling singer in the spotlight I'd seen in *Rolling Stone*, or the unhappy celebrity Lori told me about."

"Lori?"

"She told me some things you told her about your . . . life. About your bedroom in the back of the bus. About going everywhere but seeing nothing. About everybody wanting a part of you."

Mallory nodded slowly. "I remember what I told her."

"She was worried that you might not be okay."

"I'm okay. I'm more than okay."

"I can see that."

"Were you hoping that I wouldn't be?"

He shook his head quickly. "No. Absolutely not. The last thing in the world I'd hope is that you were unhappy. But I don't deny . . . I don't deny that when Lori told me what she did, one of my first impulses was to take off and come riding to the rescue."

A strange mixture of emotions assailed her. "Is that what you're here for? To ride to the rescue?" A month ago—even less—she would have gladly accepted his rescue, his protectiveness. But now . . .

"Looking at you, Mallory," David said evenly, registering her new and unexplained serenity once again, "I don't think you need rescuing anymore. Do

you?"

She shook her head, her dark hair drifting softly about her shoulders. "No," she said simply. "I've rescued myself."

"From a situation I put you back into . . . because I didn't understand."

"No—" she began protesting, realizing that he was talking about what happened between them at the Civic Center. He had been in the wrong then, yes, but so had she. And if blame were to be apportioned, she deserved part of it.

"Mallory, please," he interrupted. "I want to try to explain why I acted as I did the night of the concert."

She waited a beat. "All right," she agreed.

David began to pace, marshaling his words. "Mallory, it was very easy for me to say yes when you said you'd give up your career," he began. "It was easy because from my point of view, your career was interfering with mine and I've always put mine first. And it was easy because I had no idea what your career really was."

"Until the concert." She thought she knew what was coming.

"Until the concert," he agreed. "I sat in the Civic Center and I watched and I listened and it was . . . a revelation. Not just of your talent, but of my selfishness and arrogance."

"W-what?" This was not what she had expected at all.

"In all the time we spent talking about what you were going to give up for me, it never once occurred to me to consider what I should be giving up for you."

"I don't want you to give up anything for me!"

"What about my quest to be the perfect, impersonal professional? The one that's made me a damn good doctor but an incomplete human being?"

Mallory started at the pain in his voice.

"David—" Her first thought was to

find some way to comfort him. "David, I understand why you feel the way you do about medicine. A lot of people would have turned away from becoming a doctor. They would have become bitter after what happened. But you—"

"But I let myself get caught up in my grief and the obsession of a fourteen-year-old boy. Don't you see? *One* doctor made *one* tragic mistake. And I've compounded it. I've spent more than half my life avoiding involvement and intimacy because I've been scared to death I would repeat that one doctor's one tragic mistake. And then I found you, Mallory. I don't give a damn about the doctor and the rock star—about being from two different worlds. I want a chance for us—a man and a woman—to build our own world together. I know it won't be easy. I know that now and then it won't be just the two of us. But I want to try. Unless it's too late. Is it?"

She lifted her head in a graceful movement. "No," she told him with a beautiful smile. "How could it be when I love you, too? It's not too late for us, David. It's just the beginning. But it is a little late for Molly V. She retired tonight."

"What?" He knelt down in front of her, much as he had done the day he had first learned about Molly V.

"I quit," she said simply. "I quit in Madison Square Garden in front of thousands of people. That's what I meant when I said I'd rescued myself."

He nodded, his hands coming up, palms down, to rest on her blue-jeaned knees.

"I didn't do it for you," she went on after a moment. "I did it for myself, David. I . . . did it out of hope for us, too, in a way. But mostly, I quit for me because it's my career and my life and I have to be the one who makes the decisions in it. And one of the decisions I've made is that even though there is nothing quite like being in the spotlight, it's not worth the price I have

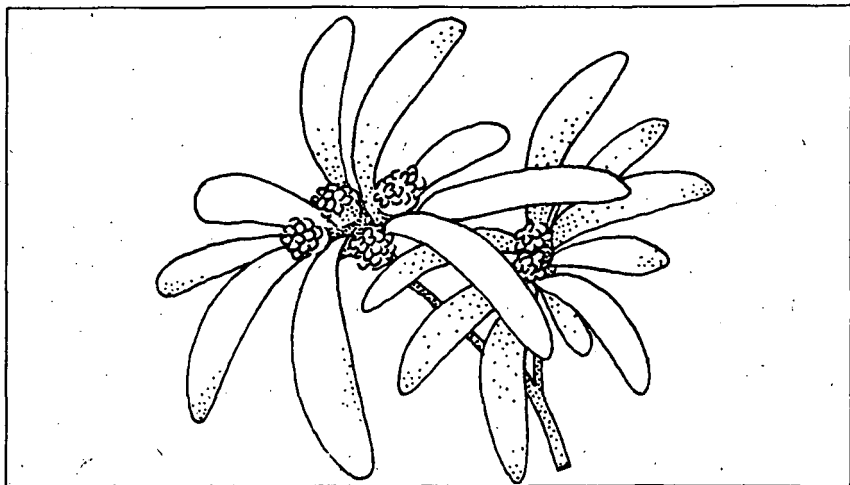
to pay to be there. It may be to some people, but it's not for me. If I hadn't known that for certain before, I know it after this last month."

"Was it... bad for you?" he questioned, thinking that "bad" was pathetically inadequate as a description of the sleepless nights and aching days he'd endured since they'd parted.

"It was hell," Mallory said honestly.

"But I survived it and I'm here... whole... with you." She looked at him, the expression in her eyes promising him the gift of herself and her love. "This is where I want to be, David. This is where I belong."

"*This* is where you belong," he said, and he surged up to meet her gift with his own. ♥



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DIANE DUNAWAY

“**A**nd the next and last contestant in our jumping class this afternoon is Desert King, ridden by Jennifer Globe and owned by Globe Enterprises,” the announcer’s voice said clearly over the loudspeaker.

It was the Santa Barbara All-Arabian Horse Show, the biggest show of the season, and Jennifer Globe had never been so nervous.

The twelve other contestants in the jumping class had already ridden over the course of eight jumps set up around the

white-railed arena. And it was her turn next. If her horse jumped all eight fences without a fault, and in less than fifty-two seconds, she would win. Otherwise she would lose not only this class but her dream of being allowed to compete in the National Championships the following month.

Jennifer didn’t even glance up at the boxes and the fifty tiers of seating around the arena or notice that they were filled to capacity and that every eye was on her. Her attention was given only to her horse and

the course she must complete.

She leaned forward slightly, letting King break into a canter, feeling the eager strength of his warm body between her legs as she made one small circle, then a second. Then—as she said a silent prayer—with a touch of her spurless heel, Desert King was charging forward to the first jump—and to victory or defeat.

She rode like a fury, and the spectators, perched on the edges of their seats, neither moved nor spoke as she cleared the obstacles at racing speed and crossed the finish line, where the judge pressed the stem of his stop watch and studied it intently before announcing, "Fifty-one seconds flat."

The applause was thunderous.

"That's my niece Jennifer," Walter Globe said to Flint Michaels, a long-time business associate he had invited to attend the show and share his private box.

Flint Michaels' dark green eyes followed the girl out of the arena. Then he answered, "You must be proud of her. She makes it look easy."

"Yes, Jennifer has won a houseful of trophies. Been showing for sixteen years, since she was nine. I thought she might quit when she went to college. But she gave up a scholarship to Stanford to stay at school at U.C. Santa Barbara so she could be close by and manage the ranch."

The entries of the jumping class had been called back into the wide ring, and when they were lined up in the center facing the judges, the winner's number was announced and Jennifer rode forward to receive the blue ribbon and a silver cup, her bright smile visible beneath the velvet hat pulled low over her eyes.

"She's a lovely girl," Flint commented, not taking his eyes from her.

"Yes," Walter agreed. "I worry about her sometimes. Now that her parents are both dead she lives alone on the family ranch. I'm giving a party there later to-

night. Her aunt and I would be pleased if you'd come."

Flint nodded, his curious gaze still following Jennifer as she rode out of the gate in triumph, the blue ribbon streaming from her gloved hand. "I'd like that," he said when she was out of sight. "I'd like that very much."

For the next few hours one class of beautiful Arabians followed another in and out of the ring while, with the flair of a host enjoying himself, Walter pointed out the favorites in each class, ordered drinks, told amusing anecdotes, and introduced Flint to his friends. Then, when it was over, they drove through the hills of Santa Barbara to Casa Contenta, the Globe family ranch, a rambling hacienda with a number of Rolls-Royces and Ferraris already parked haphazardly in its front pasture.

Inside, champagne was flowing continuously from the spouts of a silver fountain set up in the center of the main room, and excusing himself from his other guests, Walter showed Flint around the two spacious floors.

A rock 'n' roll band was tuning up on the patio as Walter pointed out the many vine-covered balconies, the intricate wrought-iron grillwork, the rose garden off the master bedroom. Then, a bit hazy from all the Scotch he had consumed, earlier at the horse show, Walter confided that the hacienda, including its collection of Arabians, was for sale.

"Of course I think the horses are beautiful. But... well, Flint, actually Globe Enterprises is in trouble and although this ranch isn't losing money now, it is dead weight. I think it would be a sound investment in the hands of the right man, but I know nothing about horses, and while Jennifer has plans to make it profitable if Desert King wins the championship, there are no guarantees. I hate to sell the ranch out from under her. She's lived here all

her life and has a lot of pride in these animals. But with her reputation she could get top dollar for managing anyone's horses, and confidentially, Flint, Globe Enterprises needs cash. We just can't hang on much longer."

Flint, nodding with interest, was about to ask for details about the property when a scattering of applause interrupted them. Following the direction of everyone's gaze, Flint found his eyes on a young woman who had just appeared at the top of the burnished wooden stairway that led across the room.

She was tall and slender; most of her height was in her long shapely legs. Her sculptured features were innocent of makeup and her long, sun-bleached blond hair was pulled straight back and clipped at the nape of her neck with a silver clasp that matched small hoop earrings in delicate pierced ears. Her silk dress was a deep aquamarine that matched her eyes and was straight-lined and belted at her unusually tiny waist.

Flint's green eyes fixed on Jennifer Globe and sparkled as he recalled her easy control of the stallion, her poise and her courageous performance.

As the applause died down, Jennifer continued down the steps, looking over the glittery crowd that formed sociable clusters around the first floor of the hacienda.

Intellectually, Jennifer knew that she was tired. She was always tired after showing a horse all day. But the music, the people, and, most of all, the day's victory had filled her with an expansive glow and energy that wouldn't have let her sleep.

Going to a white-clothed table, she took a glass and reached down to let the silver fountain fill it with bubbly champagne, while several of the crowd broke away to surround her.

"Jennifer! Congratulations!" Jeffrey

Adams was toasting her with an upheld glass of sparkling champagne. "No one shows a horse quite like you do."

"Thank you. You did well yourself."

Jennifer returned cautiously.

"But I was only second place to you, as always," he said.

Jennifer noticed a flicker of envy in his eyes, and she lowered her gaze to study the contents of her champagne glass.

Jealousy. She'd learned to contend with it long ago as a child, when people had been jealous of her family's wealth and had assumed that, since her family was rich, she must be happy and pampered. But though she never let anyone guess it, she'd always known that her house wasn't as happy as most, money or not.

She was eight years old when a drunk driver slammed head-on into her mother's car, thereby transforming a once happy woman into an ill-tempered invalid. Casa Contenta, the hacienda her family had owned for generations was anything but "contenta."

But people adjust, Jennifer realized as she looked back. Her father had become more and more involved with Globe Enterprises, and she found the company of animals could be a haven from the adult problems over which she had no control.

Serena, an Arabian mare, became her best friend and carried her not only over the eucalyptus-covered hills of the ranch but also into the show ring of small local horse shows. And so it all began—the long hours of practice, practice, and more practice. And the following year, as Jennifer watched the National Championship jumping class, she thought the horses seemed more beautiful than ever. Misty-eyed, she looked on as the blue ribbon and silver tray were awarded and photographers' flashes dazzled the scene with splashes of light. And in her deepest heart she wished with all her might that someday—

she would be in the winner's circle.

At the time, however, she knew it was an impossible dream. It was only years later, when she was nearly eighteen and Desert King was born, that she knew she had a chance.

She never imagined at that time that her parents would both be dead so soon. They had routinely flown off together for her mother to see another specialist, and plane crashes were never expected. She never expected the truth about the ranch, either.

It was not in her father's name, she was told after the funeral, as she sat black-clad in her uncle's office. It was in the name of Globe Enterprises. "For tax reasons," her uncle had explained. And, surprised as she was, Jennifer had appreciated it when her uncle did not evade the truth as her father always had, but told her exactly how high the losses for Globe Enterprises had been.

"I won't be a burden," she had said, full of optimism and energy. "I'm perfectly capable of getting a job and supporting myself. But running this ranch and horse breeding and showing are what I know best. Give me some time and I promise I'll have this ranch making enough money to recover all its losses."

And so the dream had taken on a new dimension, and for the three years since then she had managed the ranch and shown the horses as if her survival depended on it—because she knew it did.

Now suddenly the dream was within her grasp. By winning she would not only fulfill her childhood dream but would earn the right to think of the ranch as one of the Globe family's *successful* enterprises, and know that she was responsible for making it so.

She glanced up from her champagne glass and back at Jeff Adams and smiled good naturedly. Well, if she won the championship then she wouldn't care if

everyone in the whole world was jealous.

Her uncle appeared then, offering his arm and taking her from group to group and introducing her to his friends, who all smiled and offered the proper amenities and congratulations, which she accepted with equal politeness. A toast was proposed to her future success. Glasses were raised and the small group was sipping together when a tingling at the back of her neck made Jennifer turn and look around the room.

She scanned the room, past the doors to the smaller family room and the open double front doors, before she found herself looking directly into the gaze of a man leaning against the frame of the open door—a tall man whose tanned face held an aura of vigorous masculinity, a confidence and power as blatant as a slap.

He did not look away, and their gazes locked as he observed her with curious appraisal. The small crowd of admiring women surrounding him laughed at a remark he made, though the focus of his attention never left her. Then, excusing himself, he strode purposefully toward her.

She held her ground, though all her instincts and emotions seemed suddenly on guard as she was forced to lift her chin high to look into his face. "I'd like to introduce myself, Jennifer," he said, his voice warm and resonant. "My name is Flint Michaels." The light in the centers of his eyes penetrated hers for an instant as he extended a large tanned hand. It was impossible not to return his smile or allow her own hand to be engulfed briefly in his sure clasp. "After sitting with your uncle at the horse show this afternoon and watching you ride I feel like we're already friends," he finished.

Charisma, Jennifer thought, withdrawing her hand. It was in the confident carriage of his head, his striking handsomeness, and the way he looked at her.

Yes, that's why she had thought she knew him — his looks, even the way he carried himself made him seem like Dirk, conceited, irresistible Dirk, who likewise was typically surrounded by women.

Flint Michaels. Yes, he is a lot like Dirk, she thought, his presence recalling with a dart of pain the part of her past that she always resisted remembering. Dirk. The "God" of her college campus. He too had that special charisma, that smile which was impossible not to return, that sense of power, immediate and penetrating. She had given herself to him completely, innocently, believing that while her life until then had been full of pain, at last she had found someone who would love her as deeply as she loved him. But Dirk had used her—seduced her, then abandoned her to go on to another "conquest." Jennifer had vowed *never* to make the same mistake again, never to risk all that agony. And, as the years passed, she hadn't. Instead she let all her time and interest be absorbed by the horses, limiting her relations with men to friendship and dismissing with icy aloofness any of Dirk's type who happened to come her way.

Jennifer studied Flint Michaels. Yes, definitely this man was "that" type—a user. No doubt he was as skilled at having his way with women as Dirk had been. And in spite of herself she couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if she did let him chase her, just a little, just enough to deflate that big ego of his. Then, later tonight, she would let him know that he didn't appeal to her at all.

She smiled inwardly as the idea took root. *After all, she told herself, I'm a grown woman now and two can play this game.*

She smiled up at Flint, but her reply was interrupted by the arrival of her aunt.

"Jennifer, Flint!" Aunt Victoria greeted them, a glow of warmth in her brown eyes, her English accent unfaded

despite twenty years of California living. "So I see you have introduced yourselves. Good. Oh, Jennifer, please be sure to show Flint the stable. Your uncle didn't get a chance this afternoon."

Glancing over at Flint, Jennifer let her long lashes come down in a thick veil to shield her eyes. "Of course I'd be glad to show him the stables, although I doubt if Flint would be interested," she said, giving Flint a subtle yet inviting smile.

"Of course he would," her aunt interjected before Flint could speak. "He's a Texan and grew up on a ranch. Of course he's interested in horses. Oh, I see your uncle waving at me—see you two later."

"Your aunt was right," Flint said when she'd moved off. "Your uncle didn't show me the stables."

"Would you really like me to show you?" she asked, her eyes never leaving his.

"I'm very interested," he said.

"Really. When do you want to go?"

"Now. I was impressed with what I saw today. I'd like to know more." It was up to her to consider if his words held a second interpretation.

"Fine," she said, after pausing only a moment, feeling more determined than ever to lower him a peg. "The barn is at the back of the house."

She walked ahead of him, swinging her long blond ponytail and giving her slender hips an extra swirl. Oh, she would have him eating out of her hand before ten minutes had passed, she told herself as they moved out the patio doors and through the garden, then passed beyond a wrought-iron gate that Flint closed behind them with a small squeak of its hinges.

The barn door was visible in the distance, a single light dimly illuminating the wide double doors. Jennifer led the way on the gravel path that wound toward it. She made no further attempt at conversa-

tion and the only sounds were made by his boots crunching against the path and the lighter tread of her high heels.

Ahead of them the path narrowed, so she was forced to walk closer to him. Their hands unexpectedly touched—once, and then again.

She recoiled as the warm contact of his fingers sent waves of rippling disturbances racing through her like the vibrations of a tuning fork against her flesh. And when he remained close behind her, so close Jennifer could feel the heat of him, she moved off the path onto the lawn bordering it.

It was only a short distance to the stable. At the first stall door, she paused, sliding back a metal bolt to open it and reveal a dappled gray mare heavy with foal whose wide brown eyes watched them alertly. "This is Serena, our oldest and possibly finest broodmare," Jennifer explained in a matter-of-fact tone. "We're looking forward to the foal next month by a pure Egyptian stallion," she continued as she walked into the stall. She kept her back turned as she stroked the mare, and when he made no comment, she said over her shoulder, "Do you like her?"

"She's a beauty," he said, reaching to give the mare's ears a scratch. As if she understood, Serena nuzzled him, her velvety nose running over his hand and up his arm with friendly affection.

"She likes you," Jennifer observed, feeling a needling sense of betrayal.

"Most females think I'm passable when they get to know me," he said, fondling the mare. "Although some take longer than others."

Jennifer's gaze shot to his face, ricocheted off his probing emerald gaze and moved back to the mare.

"Really?" And a hint of disgust entered her tone, though she tried to keep her voice pleasant. "Maybe they find you too forward."

Flint continued stroking the mare's neck. "Maybe. But they usually respond well once they find out I'm someone who understands them."

"And I suppose they then follow you around and eat out of your hand?" Jennifer commented, balling her fists and sliding them behind her back.

"Something like that," he agreed, a hint of a smile forming around his mouth, his eyes twinkling into hers.

His self-assurance was galling, and it severely tested Jennifer's self-control. But, determined not to be forced into a scene, she ignored the remark and walked silently out of the stall and on to the next, jerking back the bolt with a snap and opening the door.

"And this is my filly, Night Wind," she said with pride. "In another few years I'm hoping she'll be a National Champion."

"I see," was all he said. And Jennifer's aggravation returned full force when Night Wind walked over and nuzzled in his pockets with friendly curiosity.

Absently Flint stroked the filly's back as a frown formed between his brows. Then, as if he'd made some kind of decision, he patted the filly one final time before saying, "She's certainly a winner. I'm sure you'll have no trouble making her a champion."

"Thank you," Jennifer said, giving the filly a last affectionate pat, from the crest of her shiny neck down the soft hair to her shoulder, before stepping outside the stall.

He followed as she showed him the rest of the horses. She was relieved that he turned his attention to the horses, approaching them with interest, complimenting all of them on their strong points and yet able to see subtle imperfections. Then he was silent again as they walked back toward the hacienda.

The moon had risen, so a tiny crescent rode low in the purple autumn sky, its fine

shape blurred by a light fog that carried the fragrance of freshly mown hay. "You really do know something about horses," she said, wanting to banish the silence that had become somehow intimate.

Even in the dim light, she could see the flash of white teeth and the sparkle of his eyes. "I'll consider that a real compliment. But I'm interested in knowing more about you."

"Are you?" she said. Trying to change the subject, she gestured toward the house. "It looks like the party's over. Everyone's gone."

She hadn't taken two steps when he stopped her, a large hand encircling her bare upper arm and holding her back in a grip that didn't hurt but wouldn't yield. Rather than struggle, she stopped and faced him.

"All right," she said, after they had stared at each other too long. "What is it you want to understand?"

"For starters, why you are smiles one minute and darts the next. But I'd like to know much more. You must realize I find you very attractive," he finished simply.

"Attractive? I guess I should be flattered, right?"

"Not especially." He was frowning now. "I find any number of women physically attractive. But initially I thought there might be something more between us." He shrugged. "Sometimes I make mistakes."

"I'm sorry that's what you thought. But there is nothing 'more' between us. And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go right to my room from here."

There was a pause as he seemed to assess her words. "Yes. I see," was all he said before his arms suddenly tightened to pull her hard against his shoulder and his other hand crossed his body to capture her chin. "In that case, one kiss won't hurt," he continued. "That is, if there really is nothing more between us."

Then his mouth was on hers, hard at first, then softer, teasing, coaxing.

It was an unexpected sensation, a whirlpool that rose to titillate, to compel. Vaguely, she thought, *he can't, I won't let him*. But she couldn't move. She was helpless in the firm strength of his arms.

A persistent voice at the back of her mind wanted her to remain stiff and unyielding, but her head swirled and her body seemed unwilling to resist, and it curved against his.

Slowly, then, his arms relaxed and he held her away from him.

Her legs were unsteady, and to her embarrassment she swayed into him. He didn't speak but continued to watch her, and when she found her voice again she said, "You had no right to do that. I didn't want you to."

A sparkle was coming to twinkle his eyes. "No? But I was curious," he said.

"Curious?"

"Yes. I wanted to know if you're really as unreachable as you like to act. It's good to know I wasn't so mistaken after all." He smiled. "Good night, until tomorrow," he finished, then turned and started toward the house.

Something in his retreating back made her recover herself. "I won't be seeing you tomorrow or any day," she said.

At the doorway he turned. "Yes. I'm afraid you will. Your uncle has invited me to stay here as his house guest until tomorrow and then... well, who knows after that." Then he was gone.

The last look on his face made Jennifer think there was some hidden meaning behind his words.

As it turned out, there was—but she didn't receive *that* shock until the following morning.

"Sold! No... no, that's impossible!" Jennifer said, staring at her uncle across the wide oak desk. She gripped the arms

of her chair, her fingernails making crescent marks in the thick leather upholstery, and tried to compose herself. "You're teasing me. . . joking." But she knew he wasn't, not about this. A feeling rose up from her stomach as she tried to control the growing fullness in her throat. She didn't interrupt her uncle again as he went on.

"I'm sorry, Jennifer. I know how much you love the ranch. Believe me, it was only a last resort to sell. But I don't need to tell you the Globe fortune isn't even a fraction of what it once was. Inflation and energy costs have driven several of our key companies out of business. As head of the family, I have to think of all of our futures. The ranch hasn't made a profit for years now, and a buyer has made me an offer that is impossible to turn down. I hope you can understand."

Jennifer sat silently in the darkness of the leather chair, her head down, afraid to speak now when she would be rash and emotional and probably say all the angry, bitter things that swirled around her head, things she would regret saying later. She didn't look up until he said again, "I hope you understand."

"I understand that you're doing what you think is best." Her voice was low. "I'm just very sorry it was the ranch that had to go."

A knock on the door interrupted them. "Come in."

The neat gray head of Sarah, her uncle's longtime secretary, poked in the door. "Excuse me, Mr. Globe," she began, "but Mr. Michaels is here to see you. He wants to go over the details of his contract to buy the ranch."

"Good. Show him in."

For a moment Jennifer felt as if the breath had been knocked out of her. Her stomach knotted, twisting into a tight ball, and a small involuntary gasp passed her lips as the tall man strode in with the

confident ease of a conquerer and shook hands with her uncle. Then both men turned to her. "And you two have met, as I recall," her uncle was saying.

"Yes. . . we have," was all Jennifer could say as she fought an urge to slap the handsome face that watched her carefully behind its pleasant smile. This was ridiculous—and really cruel. What a fool she had been! All the time *she* had been showing him the ranch, *he* had been examining it with an eye to buy. Damn him! At least he might have given her some idea of his intention. But no! He had actually let her believe that he really was attracted to her—even said as much. And that kiss, which had given her not entirely unpleasant feelings, now made her suddenly feel soiled and ashamed.

She gritted her teeth. She should have known better, of course. Men like Flint Michaels never did anything but use people to their own ends.

She got up from the chair, drawing herself to full height. "We have met," she began again coldly. "But actually I was just leaving."

"I'd like you to stay, Jennifer," Flint was saying, without moving out of her path to the door. "We need to go over some of the details together since we are going to be neighbors, for the time being anyway. I'll be staying in the casita next door."

"Details?" An icy cold challenge was in her eyes. "I'm sure you will handle all the 'details' as you see fit. I think you've done well enough without my help so far."

"Yes, well maybe you two can talk later," Walter interceded, seeking to avoid a confrontation.

"And actually we won't be neighbors for long," Jennifer continued. "The ranch is yours now. Congratulations."

She stepped around him and stalked to the door, opened it and then, as an afterthought, turned and said, "By the way,

Mr. Michaels, I think you're very *clever*."

It felt good to slam the door behind her, to stalk purposefully down the hall, and keep walking when she heard the door open again and Flint's boot heels hitting the flagstone floor as he came after her.

"Jennifer. I want to talk to you." His voice was firm.

But Jennifer didn't even look back as she answered, "There is nothing to say."

"No? What about the subject of Night Wind?"

"Night Wind?" She finally turned and faced him. "What does my filly have to do with this?"

"The 'my' is exactly what I want to discuss. There is a certain contract that calls Night Wind's ownership into question."

With a horrible sinking in her stomach, Jennifer realized what contract Flint was talking about. She had signed it nearly a year ago, for tax purposes. It was an agreement to work for the ranch until December, showing Desert King in exchange for Night Wind.

"But that was just meant as a formality, a write-off for tax purposes!" she protested.

"Perhaps. But my lawyers tell me it's completely legal and binding. The contract hasn't been fulfilled, and Night Wind isn't yours."

Jennifer squinted her eyes to narrow beacons of fury, but his expression remained emotionless, his level look telling her he wasn't bluffing. He would take the filly from her, exactly as he threatened.

Straightening, she bit back a curse and said, "All right. We'll discuss it."

"Good." He looked closely at her. "But not right now. You're too upset. I'll come back in a few hours, when you've had a chance to calm down."

"Oh, you think 'a few hours' will make me forget what you've done?" And suddenly feeling unable to hold back the sobs

that threatened to choke her, she turned and half limped, half ran up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door behind her and leaning hard against it.

Her legs were trembling. Taking two slow, lifeless steps to the bed, she threw herself on it full length and muffled her strangled cries in a pillow. The ranch, her ranch, was gone, she thought, aware now of her deep love for the green rolling pastures and miles of white fences, the mares heavy in foal and standing in wild flowers. And her dream of winning the championship—the most important dream of her life. Now it was all gone, never to be hers again, sold to a stranger.

She cried until her pillow was sodden, until her stomach contracted painfully and tears gave way to whimpers. She lay perfectly still for several minutes, wondering vaguely why crying didn't ever help when you most wanted it to. She could cry until she drowned in her own tears and nothing would change. The ranch would still be sold, her hopes for her future destroyed.

The thought of her lost home and dreams brought the tears back more powerfully than ever. But, finally, her tear-wracked body took refuge in an exhausted sleep.

Waking hours later, she discovered that the tears *had* been of use—they had washed away the sadness and sense of loss, for a while, at least. She was left with a new determination to save Night Wind, at least, from Flint.

She slowly rose and, after washing her reddened eyes with cold water, she walked downstairs and through the quiet, darkened house to the family room.

A note was there with her name clearly penned on the outside. She picked it up and read.

Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for the use of the ranch house for the party last night. We'll be

back in Santa Barbara next month, but I will be in touch with you before then. Let me know if you need any help getting re-settled.

Love Aunt Victoria

Jennifer bit her lip. She had hoped they would stay—had counted on her uncle's support against Flint. But now it looked like she'd have to do this alone.

She clenched the note in her hand. And Flint wasn't going to get her filly, she promised herself, straightening her shoulders. Everyone knew Night Wind was hers! There were witnesses!

I'll be firm, she told herself. I'll explain the exact situation to Flint. Surely he can be reasonable and, once he understands, he'll acknowledge my claim. But above all, I'm not going to act worried.

Then, she heard a firm knock on the door. Going to the door, she swung it wide in a careless gesture that she hoped conveyed complete confidence.

Flint was wearing a plain blue shirt, dark boots, and jeans that hugged his small waist and athletic hips. An enigmatic expression masked his face, though she felt the power of a man who intended to win.

"Come in," she said coolly.

He did, his casual strides falling in behind her as she led the way to the family room and indicated the green corduroy couches that faced each other in front of the fireplace.

"Make yourself comfortable—but not too comfortable," she added with a chilly glare.

"So you're really so angry."

"Angry? I'm furious! How would you like to see years of effort being sold out from under you? And you might have at least said something instead of letting me show you around as if you were just a guest. You might have been honest." Her aquamarine eyes were large and dark and

looked directly into his.

"I wasn't intending to buy the ranch when you were showing it to me, although your uncle had told me it was for sale. I made the decision after I left you last night. Your uncle was getting desperate, although he kept it from you. I thought you might even be glad it was I who bought it and not someone else."

Jennifer's eyebrows raised. "And why would you imagine that?"

"I thought I made that clear last night. And if you want honesty, I think that unless I've misjudged you, you don't normally respond to a man the way you did to me."

Jennifer only stared, not knowing what to say since yes or no seemed equally bad.

"Look," she said, trying to stay calm. "This isn't getting us anywhere. You came over here because there was some business about Night Wind. If we could just move directly on to that... I'm not interested in prolonging this any more than necessary," she said.

"Okay. I'll get to the point. I want you to fulfill your contract."

Jennifer stared. He couldn't be serious, and yet the sober lines of his face told her he was. "You mean work for you?" she said at last. "No! I'd never even consider it."

Flint's eyes riveted her for a moment. Then, unexpectedly, he was suddenly on his feet. "I see. Then I guess there's no point in wasting any more time."

"What are you doing?" Jennifer asked, following him as he moved toward the door.

"I'm going," he said, as if it were obvious.

"What do you mean 'going'? This is ridiculous. Did you come here actually expecting to hear any other answer?"

"Yes. Last night it seemed you wouldn't give up Night Wind so easily." He shrugged. "Sometimes I'm wrong."

He started toward the door again.

"Wait! I have no intention of giving up Night Wind. What you don't seem to realize is that she is already mine and has been since she was foaled. My uncle and I made that contract so he could write the filly off the ranch taxes as my salary for showing Desert King. It was a formality. There was never any question that the filly was mine and there still isn't. Talk to my uncle if you don't believe me."

He remained standing in front of the door, although he took his hand off the knob. "I talked to your uncle two hours ago. He tells me the same story but agrees the contract is legally binding. And since he's already signed all the ranch stock over to me, if you want Night Wind, you'll have to show Desert King through December just like you'd have done if he hadn't been sold."

"But that's not fair! Even someone like *you* should realize that!" she cried, walking nearer to him.

Flint paused for a long considering moment, his green eyes flashing as they riveted her where she stood. "All right," he said at last, resting his hands on his hips. "I'll make a bargain with you. Your contract doesn't officially terminate until the end of December. But if you win the championship in November, I'll sign Night Wind over to you, and you can consider the contract fulfilled one month early."

"And if I lose?"

"Then you'll have to stay the extra time." There was a hint of amusement in his eyes as he explained. "I have to give you some incentive and getting away from me seems to be the strongest one available."

Jennifer paused, compressing her lips, as she considered his bargain. "Why do you want *me* to ride Desert King so badly?" she asked. "With your kind of money you could hire anyone you

wanted."

"Because you're the rider with the best chance of winning," he stated in a matter-of-fact tone that voided the compliment. "And I want to win, almost, but not quite, as much as I imagine you do."

"I don't seem to have much choice in any of this, do I?" Jennifer said, her bitterness and despair showing plainly in her voice and the slump of her shoulders.

His hand reached to caress her cheek. "I do care what you're feeling, Jennifer, even if I might appear harsh to you. I admired this ranch from the moment I drove up the driveway with your uncle, and I wanted it. But because I admire it, I realize more fully what this must be like for you. I didn't do this to make you unhappy. I wanted to make it as easy for you as possible. I guess I've been too hard on you. Maybe I'm so used to having what I want I've learned to expect it automatically."

The smell of his shaving soap filled her nose and she felt again as if he was surrounding her in that ring of his attraction. Why did he have to be kind suddenly, to speak so earnestly? And now the nearness of his large chest, the soft caressing note in his voice, all compelled her to yield to what might happen next. But when he leaned closer, it was a reflex action for her to put a hand against him, pushing him away even as she tilted her head back, only to find his lips dangerously close. "Don't kiss me. Don't," she demanded, still pushing him away, her movements more frantic as they failed.

"I'm so sorry, Jennifer," he was whispering in her ear. "You've been hurt before, but I won't—"

"Don't say that! I'll never believe a man like you!"

He eased his hold and pulled away. She saw the disappointment in his face as he said, "A man like me? Who am I like—the idiot that did this to you?"

"I don't want to discuss this, Flint."

"Not now?"

"Not ever. It's my business why I feel this way, not yours," she concluded forcefully. She was surprised when he only said "I see," and didn't press her further. He held her away from him and continued, "Then let's call a simple truce. From now until further notice we'll have a platonic relationship, and if it's to be changed, then it will be because it's what you want."

"Fine," she said. "But you're not my type of man, Flint, and that's not going to change."

He nodded, with a smile. "You win." But even as he said it, the depth of his dimples, the look in his eyes told her she hadn't won—not yet.

The next morning Jennifer rose extra early, attempting to avoid Flint while she worked the horses. But her efforts were in vain, since he managed to rise just as early and insisted she show him the basic techniques of training, forcing her to explain everything and suffer his constant presence.

She wanted to remain hostile to him, but she found it wearing to constantly be rude. She really didn't like conflict, and since he didn't attempt to provoke her, but instead accepted her off-hand treatment of him with politeness, she had no excuse but to be civil.

The next day was the same, and so was the next, until it became routine for them to handle the horses together. And as the leaves of the great oak trees turned gold and began to drop, and the days shortened and blended one into the other to become a week and then two, Jennifer found that in spite of her desire to ignore him, she was acutely aware of exactly where he was, even in the evening as she sat reading or watching T.V., alone in the big house. Her ears seemed attuned to

every sound that came from his casita, especially the sound of his Jaguar starting with the roar of a beast and droning down the gravel drive to a destination he never spoke of.

He's probably going to visit one of his girl friends, she thought to herself, glad she didn't care where he went. Certainly he never made any inquiries about how *she* spent her evenings. And yet, though he made no further overt advances as the days passed, some instinctive knowledge, something in the serious, pondering look in his eyes, the preciseness of his movements when he was with her, told her he was just as aware of her as she was of him. And it was possibly this that finally brought her to an almost painful level of self-consciousness and a sense of not being able to put him out of her mind. Finally, it took a near accident with King, when she inadvertently pulled him up over a jump just because Flint appeared unexpectedly, to make her realize something had to change. And alone in the big ranch house that night, she considered her alternatives.

She could simply practice when he wasn't around, she told herself. But already he had proved he could rise just as early as she, and he was always at the barn, always near. That was the problem, she told herself.

Or she could tell him the truth—well yes, and what was that? she asked herself. Could she possibly admit exactly what he had already told her with such overbearing certainty—that *he* did touch something important in her, something that frightened her, something that she was running away from?

Finally, knowing she would never sleep, she headed for the one place that had always been her refuge—the stables.

The leaves of the large oak trees trembled with the wind overhead as the gravel crunched beneath her feet. How many

times, she wondered, had she walked this path to the barn as a child, trying to escape the unhappiness in the large hacienda? And yet how much more difficult her problems seemed now. At least then her choices were her own, but now her life had been invaded by an enemy she could not resist. It wasn't fair, wasn't rational that she should be fool enough to respond to Flint, when he was so much like Dirk.

She shook her head as if to clear it of him, and she was perhaps halfway down the barn aisle when she heard a low moan from Serena's stall. She stopped, and as she was retracing her steps to investigate, another deep, agonized moan drifted out.

Quickly Jennifer pulled back the bolt and opened the door to see Serena stretched out in the middle of her stall, her huge pregnant body and her gray coat making her resemble a beached whale.

The foal! It would be even earlier than she'd expected.

"Easy girl, easy," Jennifer said softly as Serena raised her neck with another groan of effort and reached out to nuzzle her mistress's hand. Her large brown eyes, usually so soft and loving, were now dulled with agony.

The sight sent a stab of feeling into Jennifer's stomach that dropped to her toes as she recalled the vet's words on the subject of foaling. *A horse is born in twenty minutes, coming out like a diver with its head between its front legs. Any other way is trouble.*

Already she could tell by the lather on Serena's neck that the mare had labored far longer than twenty minutes and that she had "trouble."

Jennifer walked to the mare's flanks, looking for some sign of the emerging foal, her heart falling and twisting in a knot as the mare labored with another contraction and still nothing happened. If Serena was to live, she must find help right away. So, stepping outside the stall,

she ran to the small black telephone hanging in the tack room.

Quickly, she called the veterinarian, only to hear the recorded voice of an answering machine. The message explained that the vet was on a call where there was no telephone. Jennifer left a message, stressing the urgency, then hung up the phone.

Apparently she was on her own. Taking a grip on herself, she headed back up the barn to Serena, who was even worse than before, her eyes clouded and glazed, her breathing labored. And for the first time Jennifer wondered what she would do if she had to put the mare out of her misery. It was an alien thought that would hardly register.

"Jennifer?"

The sound of her name startled her to her feet; though it was Flint's voice, it was suddenly more welcome than she had ever imagined it could be.

"Flint, it's Serena. She's foaling but there's something wrong. I can't get a vet."

Flint knelt beside Serena before running a hand over her mountainous belly and her neck, looking into her eyes. His face had lost all expression except frowning concern. Then, moving to her flanks, he pushed her tail aside and carefully examined her.

Flint straightened, his face unruffled. "I'll need hot water, lubricant, towels, and some rubber gloves if you have them," he said, rolling up his sleeves.

His voice was as matter-of-face as his look. Willing now to accept help from any source, Jennifer didn't say what she thought—that he had no more experience than she—but just hurried to the tack room and brought the things he needed.

Serena seemed even worse, if possible, when she returned a few minutes later. The mare hardly moved as Flint put gloves on his washed hands before begin-

ning to do what he must obviously have done or seen done before, examine the position of the foal inside the mare.

Jennifer waited in tense silence, her eyes pinned on his face. After a time, a ghost of a smile played about his mouth.

"It's alive and kicking," he said. "And it's a filly, if I know anything about the females on this ranch," Flint added, with a larger smile that lacked the tightness of fear. "Now we just have to get that little gal born."

Next came a series of what Jennifer could only describe as pushes and pulls by Flint. Then suddenly Flint's hand withdrew, holding locked in his strong grip two front feet and a nose between them—a tiny black nose with a white snip on the end and elegant white stocking on the front feet all the way to the knees, where the black began.

The relief Jennifer experienced went clear to the pit of her stomach, and it seemed she could breathe again. Then a lump grew hard in her throat and tears welled in her eyes as Serena raised her neck, stretching it to reach her daughter's nose in a first kiss.

For some time the filly lay in the straw, seeming to get her bearing. Then, as if prodded by an inner timetable, she began to scramble in a flurry of long, wet legs, trying to get up.

Flint laughed at the filly's new trick and, hearing the warmth of Flint's laughter, Jennifer raised her eyes to his profile as he remained looking at the foal. He might be someone who uses people, and he might have used unfair means to get her to work for him, but he did love horses.

"It seems to me, Flint Michaels, that you know a lot more about horses than you've said. Or is this a case of your 'improvising'?"

He turned to her with a wonderfully gentle light in his eyes, and she suddenly

wished she had inspired that look, instead of the foal. He shrugged. "Living on a ranch in Texas taught me practical things about horses, but I never learned to show them the way you do. You've taught me more than I could have imagined," he said.

In the intimacy of the dimly lit barn, with new life before them, it seemed a moment for confidences as he took her hand and asked, "Are you still so eager to leave the ranch?"

"Of course," she said, throwing back her hair. But even as she said it she knew she didn't sound convincing. The hand holding hers was gently transferring warmth from his fingers to hers.

"I don't believe it," he said, yet the knuckle of his forefinger that traced her jaw line was not a challenge but a caress.

Jennifer tried to remember how angry she was. He used me, and he's still using me, *just* using me. But somehow the blazing fury she wanted to reexperience did not come. "What are you doing, Flint?" she asked at last.

He laughed. "So you *can* call me by name. You don't do that very often, you know. You really avoid it. Why?"

"I asked my question first," she said.

"Yes. I guess you did. What was it? What am I doing?" He seemed to ponder. "I suppose you mean by that why am I here?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to take a walk. When I saw the barn lights I thought you might be here. I never can seem to resist you. Call me a fool. Because I'm beginning to think I am one."

He touched her again, his fingers gently brushing the stray hairs around her face, then running along her shoulder and down her arm in a trail of fire.

"You a fool? You make fools out of other people, Flint. You are never the fool."

"No? Is that why I keep beating myself against these defenses of yours?"

"I doubt it," she said sarcastically.

"Probably you've been trying so hard for the same reason as most men. You can't be denied anything, and you prefer a challenge."

She could see by the look on his face that her words had succeeded in annoying him. But feeling suddenly as if he were cornering her, she got up and walked outside the stall.

She knew he would follow, and she had only gotten beyond the barn, where the unbaled hay was stacked, when he took her upper arm and whirled her around. "Stop running away, Jennifer," he said tightly. "I'm not some kind of monster trying to run a number on you. I merely want you to admit the obvious."

"Well, if it's obvious, why do I need to admit anything?" she said, wanting to run away from the light in his eyes that touched her in dangerous ways. She never wanted to be touched again. "I want to go back to the house," she whispered.

"No. Not yet, Jennifer. Later, but not now."

"I have to. This is no good," she said, aware of the compelling atmosphere building around her, of his arm sliding around her waist to draw her nearer, of the low moan that she stifled in her throat.

"Why?" he was asking, his thumb touching the sensitive hollow beneath her ear.

She tried to push him away, but her arms felt weak, useless, as she said, "Because! Because it's all wrong. I don't want to feel this way...to care for..." She paused before she said any more, already sorry her tongue had run away with her. "Look," she began again. "I only know what my instincts say, and..."

He pulled her nearer, leaning his head to kiss the line of her chin, slowly savoring each inch of skin up to her ear, reducing

her resistance further as her limbs felt suddenly as weak and unsteady as the newborn foal's.

"What do your instincts say?" he asked, his eyes probing into hers again.

"That I have no business being here. That I'm being ridiculous and foolish. And that I will pay for all this with a lot of pain."

He continued to hold her dangerously close, the strength of his arms bracing her as his fingers traced their way up her back to the back of her neck, touching the hair there, gently pulling it, then moving higher to where she had pinned it with a long silver clip.

She heard a click as he snapped it open, felt the hair that had been held taut against her head loosen into a heavy wave that fell onto her shoulders in silky strands.

He buried his face in the blond mass, as if it were a shower of water and he dying of thirst. "I don't know how to explain it," he said, pausing to formulate his words. "I understand investment strategies, how to motivate employees, even how to birth a horse. But as far as you're concerned, I've had to go on instinct, too, and my instincts say that no matter how much I see you I want to see more. Part of me—and God help me—feels, well, at peace with myself when I'm with you." He smiled. "Does that seem silly? But the truth is, I can't seem to get enough of you, Jennifer. I wish I understood why, but I don't."

If she turned her lips only slightly toward him they would touch his cheek. And if that happened there would be no going back. So she turned her face in the opposite direction, away from him not wanting him to see her eyes.

He was closer, his voice deeper—nearer her ear. "Do you feel anything like that, Jennifer?"

She knew she felt an equally unexplain-

able need for him. And somehow now, after watching him deliver the filly, feeling his calm strength and finally sharing the marvel of the birth, everything she held against him seemed more clouded than ever. So she said nothing. And when she didn't answer the tightening of his body, the pulling away made her realize, even before he sighed long and windily, that she had disappointed him. "It's not an easy thing to put yourself on the line and be rejected," he said.

"I didn't reject you, not exactly," she said.

"Is that what you think?"

"Well. I do have certain feelings," she admitted.

"Feelings?" He smiled. "Well that's a start, anyway, something to work with." His hand worked up her throat to cup her chin. "And now I'm going to kiss you, Jennifer," he said, with a forcefulness behind his words that told her there was no escape. "Don't fight me, please," he finished in a whisper.

"It won't matter," she moaned. "You know you're stronger."

"I don't want to use my strength. I want you to want me," he said. "I know you think I'm difficult." His thumb touched her nose, her cheek, then her lips, which he brushed softly. "I am difficult," he admitted. "But I can be gentle too."

He picked her up then, and she didn't resist as he carried her to where the hay was stacked like a giant golden nest, laying her there, his own body following her down, his lips remaining close to hers and bearing an inevitability.

"Flint—Flint, I can't do this. You have to understand—"

"I do understand—better than you know." His eyes filled with an intensity of need she felt him trying to control. His lips lowered to pause only a breath away from hers as he whispered, "Come, Jennifer, kiss me."

"Flint." His name became both a protest and a caress. She turned her head, unable to resist him, her eyes becoming deeply blue as their lips joined and it seemed they melted one into the other.

Jennifer let her hands roam over the broad expanse of his back, measuring the width of his shoulders and then sliding downward to the taper of his waist, wanting this to go on forever but knowing it would not. And then she dared not think at all as he gently removed her clothing.

Standing up, he removed his own clothes, dropping them onto a heap off the edge of their straw pedestal. Then he was kneeling above her, magnificent in his nakedness, his perfection silhouetted against the moon, and she knew she was quivering. Now he would make love to her, and the hot desire in her own fevered blood couldn't deny him.

I want him, she thought. I want him and I can't fight it anymore.

"Flint," she whispered, hardly aware she spoke as the fire burned brighter.

He took her face between his hands, talking to her, whispering soft words that she hardly heard but more felt in the care he took with her, the soaring spiral on which he carried her to peak after unknown peak of unimagined delight. Then she was falling, bursting with a deep, wrenching wonderfulness, moaning her pleasure into his mouth as he kissed her. Then sinking, sinking into a warm abyss of perfect contentment.

They lay clutched in each other's arms for a long leisurely time as the euphoria receded. Finally Jennifer could no longer keep from coming to earth. She wanted suddenly to cry, but forcibly held back the tears. He was kissing her cheeks then, before lifting off her with an easy press of his arms.

She felt vulnerable, completely ridiculous, in fact, here, naked. And somehow even the good, satisfying feeling inside her

seemed suddenly the enemy too. And without wanting to she remembered lying naked in Dirk's arms like this—well, no, this was different. But still it was enough the same so she recalled, with a vivid stroke of pain in her chest, how it all had ended.

She reached for her shirt, but he took her arm, lifting the hand and kissing it. "Don't," he said. "You have such a beautiful body."

She stared up at him. "But I'm cold," she said, wanting some excuse to escape from this total intimacy.

He only smiled. "We can fix that." And scooping her into his arms, he held her gently as he walked around the end of the barn and toward the casita—his casita—his territory, she realized.

"No, Flint." She pushed hard against him. "Not now...not tonight." And when she continued to push he did set her down, though he still gripped her upper arms as he held her gently away from him, his face sobering.

"I want you to stay, Jennifer."

"No. It's not the right time. Too much has happened already."

"Do you regret it?"

"Yes, part of me does."

"And the other part?"

She tried to pull away, but he prevented her still. "You're not answering me."

"You know I wanted you and you know it was good," she said fiercely between her teeth. "But that doesn't mean I want to spend the night with you."

There was a pause between them while Jennifer became even more acutely aware of her nakedness, and of his. "Have I told you recently that you're a very difficult woman?" he said finally.

Then unexpectedly he chuckled, a low sound that came from deep in his throat and crescendoed. His laughter, the relaxing of his grip on her arms broke the tension and Jennifer, feeling ridiculous

standing there naked and arguing, laughed too.

"I give up," he said at last. "Just a kiss, Jennifer, one last one, since you're determined to leave me alone all night. It's not the way I want it to be, but I am trying to learn to be patient."

Seriously, she looked directly into his eyes as he moved toward her. What did he feel? What did she? And where would this end? she asked herself. But then her lips were covered by his in a tender, loving caress. Was it possible that he really cared, that miracles came true?

"Good night," he said.

"Good night." She turned and walked away then, feeling self-conscious as she hurried along, grateful that the moon had gone behind clouds and aware of his eyes following her silvery form. And when she couldn't stand it any longer, she ran for the house.

Later, lying alone in her bedroom, still quivering whenever she recalled the feel of his hands upon her, she realized there was no way to fight it. Together they were like a natural force and what happened was as predictable and apparently uncontrollable as the law of gravity.

But there was no need to be swept away, she told herself. If men could have physical affairs with women, then why couldn't she have one with a man?

He had never mentioned love. No, love was not a part of this for either of them. Though, if he were different, she might love him—if she trusted him—but she didn't. A future with Flint was out of the question, and thinking about it would only invite unhappiness, she told herself. Why not just consider the present and enjoy the pleasure of the moment? It was such a short time until the championship, when she would leave the ranch permanently. Why not just let things go on... And so for the next several days, as

time brought the championship closer, Jennifer stopped fighting what her body had wanted all along and at night after cooking dinner together, as had become their routine, she didn't avoid the arms that inevitably drew her close and made her once again melt into one pleasurable sensation after another. Soon, very soon—that is, if she won the championship—she would leave.

Yet, it did seem to Jennifer that there was a new gentleness in his touch, a certain warmth in the smile on his lips and a change in the lights in his eyes. Was she just imagining that his feelings for her were deepening? Could he come to care just for her? Or was he just using her, charming her into becoming his willing slave like so many others, a slave he would discard when the time came? And if he did care, wouldn't he ask her to stay on the ranch, win or lose?

It was a question that grew to dominate her thoughts. But then it seemed she had a way to test him when she received a letter from a friend she had known in school who was now living in England. It was a long, chatty letter telling of the country life in England and then ending by asking Jennifer to come to England.

It would be a good opportunity, she thought, refolding the letter and tapping it against her palm. She had decided to take an apartment in San Diego after the Nationals, but going as far away as London for a time might be a better, cleaner, break from here. But what would Flint think? Would he even care? And the next morning after breakfast, when Flint was thumbing through a stud book, Jennifer took the opportunity to read the letter aloud with a casual air.

She thought she would scream when a full minute passed in which he didn't react at all.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked finally, unable to stand his silence.

He continued looking intently into the book, and only shrugged. "It would probably be fun," he said emotionlessly. "You'd enjoy it." He paused, closed the book, and looked at the binding for a moment before turning to face her. "Is this the latest edition of the stud book?" he asked. "I don't see any of last year's foals listed in here."

"That's the one for last year," she said, impatiently walking to the shelf, grabbing the book, and slamming it into his hand. "If you read carefully you would see it's the wrong one," she finished coldly, starting to walk away.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said, putting down the book and walking across the room to block her path out the door. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm not sure I want to talk about it now, Flint. I thought you might have an opinion about my going to England. That's all."

"I do have an opinion," he said frowning. "But I want you to do what you want to. Anyway, as I recall, my opinions never meant much to you."

Jennifer stared at him. "You're right," she said at last, coolly lifting her chin. "It's not important what you think."

She turned away then, jerking her arm free and walking out the door. He had said all he needed to, and her emotions suddenly felt covered with a sheet of ice, a feeling that wouldn't let her speak further or even look at him again that afternoon, as they packed the saddles and bridles and loaded the truck before leading Desert King into the trailer and heading south for Del Mar, where in less than a week, the championship would be held.

It was almost four hours and two hundred miles north of San Diego along the coast to Del Mar, a village town where both racing and horse showing were regular events.

The Del Mar track and fairgrounds

were a complex of white fences and barns, a ring with covered grandstands for horse showing, and a track and larger stands for racing. "Where the Turf Meets the Surf" was the motto in large red letters stretched on a banner across the main street. But Jennifer hardly noticed, and when they pulled into the show grounds she hopped out of the truck to get stall and room assignments from the show office.

"Barn B4," Jennifer said when she reentered the truck. It was the first thing either of them had said in hours. They were quick to unload King and get him settled in a stall thick with hay in one of the old adobe brick barns. Their rooms were over the barns, and Jennifer was surprised to find Flint had ordered two separate rooms.

"Two rooms?" she asked, before she could stop herself from seeming surprised.

"It doesn't matter," was all he said, putting her things in one of the rooms and his in the other.

She was glad when he didn't follow her downstairs. She didn't want him to see her face—the disappointment she knew was there. So she didn't stay around the barns after checking King but went to dinner alone, satisfying her hunger with the fare from one of the small food stands on the grounds and chatting with several of the other competitors milling around until long after it was dark. Then, returning to her room, she climbed the stairs and was just inserting the key in the lock when she heard Flint's voice. "What are you doing?" he asked, as if she were entering a room that was not her own.

He was on the stair landing looking at her. "I'm going to my room," she whispered, aware it was late and not wanting to wake anyone already sleeping in the adjoining rooms.

He came closer. She couldn't make out his features in the dark but could feel his

breath on her cheek as he said, "You didn't think you were actually going to sleep in there?"

"But you said it didn't matter," she challenged. "I thought..."

His laugh interrupted her as he came closer, leaning to scoop her up, so suddenly she was in his arms, being carried down the hall to his room. "Did you really think we were going to sleep separately?" He laughed again. Then the key was in the lock, the door was swinging open, and he was kicking it closed behind him.

When the door closed Jennifer began to struggle but he paid no attention, his face serious, intense, as he pulled her closer, kissing her, pulling her western shirt with his teeth so it unsnapped in a series of pops. "Jennifer," the word came from deep within him, an urgent cry. And from her innermost self Jennifer felt an answering need that merged her body with his as his kiss tasted, savored, explored her lips, her mouth, and a rush of warm tingling delight fired her own desires.

Yet she resisted them. Things couldn't go on this way. They had to talk. And so she said, "Making love is not going to solve anything."

"Maybe not," he said, walking to the bed and tossing her on it with a bounce before sitting down to remove his shoes. "But it's not a bad way to begin."

His confidence in her acquiescence couldn't have been more casual if they had been married twenty years. He stood and unbelted his jeans, slipping them down his slim hips, stepping out of them.

He bent close as he laid them at the foot of the bed. But now there was a question in his expression as he leaned to kiss her again.

She pushed him away, getting up to face him, her hair tousled, her lips still red

from his kisses. He started coming closer, but she thrust out a hand. "No, Flint. Please. I want to talk."

He stopped, having learned to read the firmness of her mood by the position of her chin, noticing that the slant was more pronounced than ever. He sat on the bed, a hand on one raised knee as he cocked his head and said, "Okay, Jennifer. What is it?"

Jennifer hadn't rehearsed her words and now, confronted with his attention, she wasn't sure for a moment how to begin, but then she said, "I don't belong to you, that's all. You've bought the ranch but you haven't bought me. You don't have any right to do what you just did. I'm not some kind of toy, Flint, and I want you to stop treating me like one!"

"I don't think of you as a toy."

"You do! I want something lasting, Flint, not something that gets thrown away when the novelty is gone. I want the biggest part of a man's heart, not just the time he has for recreation."

There, she thought, she'd said it. Now if he would just tell her she was wrong—that he did care for her—that she did have the biggest piece of his heart.

The belligerence was gone from his face. His eyes caressed her as he stood and came to her. His long fingers were tracing the line of her jaw, her throat, then lower, with such gentleness even while they renewed that now familiar fire. And suddenly, Jennifer knew with sudden, overwhelming certainty that she loved him.

"Jennifer, Jennifer, I want you to trust me," he whispered, a catch in his words that went directly to a deep-felt nerve.

She could not speak at once, a tightness closing her throat and making swallowing necessary and difficult. So instead, impulsively, she reached out her arms as her ragged voice called "Flint!"

He was kissing her then, his chapped lips slightly rough against hers as he took

full possession of her mouth for a timeless moment before drawing away. Frustration, concern, seduction all combined in his expression as he stood over her, his gaze searching her face. And when he seemed to find what he sought, his mouth came down again, this time demanding her response.

Now her lips parted easily. And when they did he was gentle again, seeming to want all of her in his mouth, to taste her, to feel the shape of her lips, the corners of her mouth as his hands held her face, his fingers working into her hair and brushing it back from her temples. Then he swung her up into his arms and carried her to the bed, easing his body over hers. She felt engulfed not only by his size but by the intensity of her own response as his touch opened a tingling in her abdomen, a wanting, a building within her, encircling her, surrounding her as sure as his arms that pulled her closer.

If only he would stop—if only he would never stop. And as the entire world focused itself so it was only them, an inner voice whispered, *I love him, I love him*, as at last the wave crested and she was cascading over the top, then swirling down, down, unaware that she moaned his name into his mouth before once again she lay quiet in his arms.

All through the night their passions rekindled, drawing them together with the irresistible strength of magnets, driving them to spend themselves before falling asleep again until, all too soon, the night became day.

When Jennifer awoke the next morning it was within the embrace of his arms and filled with a satiation she had never known. And from that moment and for the next three days, she put the future out of her mind, concentrating instead on the present and their time together.

They spent the days working Desert King, Flint watching her as she rode over

jump after jump, her form reflecting the approving admiration in his eyes.

At sunset they rode together down to the beach, stopping the horses at the edge of the surf and letting them paw and splash as they watched the sky turn to lavender and then vermillion. And the nights they spent again as lovers.

Occasionally she told herself this couldn't go on, and she asked herself if she could bear to lose twice in love. But this small voice was overpowered by another, stronger, need that wanted to believe he might be falling in love with her too. If only he would, oh, how she longed to admit her own newly discovered feelings, to say, "I love you," and have him take her in his arms and cover her face with kisses and tell her he wanted her to stay with him forever. But even as the days wore on, secret moments out of time, a fairy tale before the eventual, inescapable reality, a shred of caution kept her from admitting what she felt, of becoming another openly worshipful female. No, if she told him how she felt and he rejected her she couldn't stand it. And she could almost imagine the look of surprise touched with triumph and even pity that would come to his face. She needed more time, and more and more she recalled their bargain. "If you win the championship in November you can consider the contract fulfilled a month early," he had told her.

"And what if I lose?"

"Then you'll have to stay the extra time, Jennifer. I have to give you some incentive. And getting away from me seems to be the strongest one available."

Oh, how things had changed from that time. How could she ever have known that being with him would become so important? It wasn't fair, and yet there was no choice for it. And more and more she realized she must somehow lose.

It was a foreign, horrible alternative at

first, and lying in bed with him, his arms possessively around her, she knew she had wanted the championship more than anything all her life. And she knew Flint wanted it too. But what did a trophy and blue ribbon really mean if it meant they would be parted? She was a woman in love, and what kind of a woman was she if she didn't do everything she could to try to make him love her back?

It was the hardest choice she had ever made. But as the day of the first eliminations came, she made up her mind to lose.

The day of the competition began as overcast, typical for the seaside of Del Mar. But then, like magic, the haze disappeared and the sky became an intense blue.

The competitors would jump in three rounds, and the ten best times and scores would determine the ten finalists. How easy it was going to be just to pull up on the last jump, to eliminate herself, she thought as she entered the ring. But she quickly discovered that the hours and days and years of training Desert King made him jump with eager pride, in spite of her subtle attempts to slow him down. As she exited the second round still without faults, a strange feeling was roiling her insides.

It would be just as easy to pull him up in the finals, and accepting Flint's thumbs-up sign with a smile, Jennifer went in for the third round and went clean.

"You're unbeatable," Flint told her later, after an intimate dinner *a deux* during which they celebrated her inclusion into the finalists.

"Overconfidence is dangerous," she said. "There were several other times as good as mine, and Jeff Adams' horse had an even better one."

"But you won't let him beat you," Flint said. "You've wanted this too badly to let anything stand between you and this championship."

He toasted her then and she smiled, careful to hide the war within herself which his words underlined and which she felt more pointedly with each hour as they ticked off to the inescapable final moment when she would enter the ring.

He guided her to her own room that night, unlocking the door but making no move to step inside.

"Tonight you rest," he said. "Tomorrow you'll need all your strength."

In keeping with her own casualness about their relationship, she nodded, not wanting him to realize how necessary their lovemaking had become. "Good night," he said, leaning down to kiss her. "Sleep well," he said, taking her fingers and kissing them.

"I will, and good night," she said, wishing she could find a way to prolong the moment, wanting to tell him her feelings, to admit everything and count on that new emotion she had seen in his face and felt in his voice. And yet, stepping inside, she closed the door.

It was a horrible night in which she learned more fully than ever how necessary their nights together had become. She tossed and turned, unable to sleep, only to rise well before dawn.

She knew Flint, though an early riser, wouldn't be up for hours. Feeling a fluttering nervousness in her stomach, along with a need to be alone to fight the battle raging within her, she dressed and went downstairs to the barns.

By the time Flint arrived, obviously puzzled by her disappearance, she was already having Desert King saddled.

"What happened to you this morning? I thought we were going to have breakfast together."

"I couldn't sleep," she said shortly, "and I'm not hungry."

She kept her face turned away as he spoke. "It's a big day today. Anyone would be nervous. Is there anything I can

do?"

"No," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I think you've done enough."

She knew she was behaving strangely, but again the strength of her emotions seemed to demand it. Wanting to separate herself from him completely, she turned her attention away, trying to concentrate all of it on King as she mounted and adjusted the reins in her hand.

Flint, oh, Flint, a voice inside her cried out as she rode away. Oh, God, but she couldn't think about him now. So forcing him out of her mind, Jennifer kept her eyes fixed directly ahead as she trotted King toward the ring.

The steward was there, his derby off and the inside filled with papers, each with a number on it.

Pulling King to a halt, Jennifer dismounted to stand among the others, then reached into the hat to pull out one of the papers. Number nineteen. She would be last. A good position in that she would know the time she had to beat, a bad one since the track between the jumps, presently graded smooth, would be roughened and therefore more dangerous to ride at high speed.

She rode King slowly around the make-up arena as the first horse took the course, trying to keep her nerves and King's calm and collected.

King was in excellent form, at the apex of conditioning, the height of perfection, and something inside Jennifer swelled large with pride, knowing he was the best. Several fellow competitors passed by, wishing her luck, and she returned their wishes in kind. The air was growing more intense, touching a basic part of her. It was a day she had dreamed of for so long and yet there was Flint. If only she hadn't fallen in love.

Then Jeff Adams approached, a cold glint in his eyes as he assessed first Desert

King, then Jennifer. In equal measure Jennifer watched him. Indeed, his stallion Argos looked in excellent condition, prancing with energy yet under control. Jeff wheeled the stallion close to King, and she felt her horse stiffen as the stallion rolled his eyes and would have struck with a forefoot had Jeff not checked him.

Jeff laughed. "Argos is spoiling for a fight," he commented. "How is King doing?"

"He's working fine," Jennifer said shortly, wanting to get rid of Jeff so she could continue to focus her attention on the coming competition. Jeff leaned closer.

"Listen, Jennifer." He smiled slyly. "I don't know what allegiance you owe Flint after he bought the ranch out from under you. I'd say you don't owe him a thing. So, if for some reason King should lose today, it means ten grand for you."

Jennifer could only stare at him. It sickened her that he had actually offered her a bribe, and a fury rumbled in her chest at the insult; though not wanting to spoil her concentration by losing her temper, she said, "I agree with you Jeff. I don't owe Flint anything. But I'm not winning for him, I'm winning for me. I've always wanted this, trained for it. And now I'm going to do my best to win. Money isn't an issue and neither—neither is anything else."

As she spoke, Jennifer suddenly knew it was true. Yes, even while she did love Flint, foolishly, hopelessly, nothing could make her purposely lose this championship. She had been even more ridiculous to think she could. This was in her blood, this thrill of horses and competition, and no one, not even Flint, could make her stop short of accomplishing her dreams.

She turned King away just as Argos struck out with a front foot again, his iron-shod hoof barely missing King and Jeff doing nothing to prevent it. Gritting

her teeth and narrowing her eyes, she stared at Jeff, who only smiled with a superior air as she continued to ride away.

King was trembling with anger as she guided him out of sight of Argos beyond several practice jumps. "Easy, easy boy," she said, stroking his neck, which had tensed at the challenge of the other stallion, watching the muscles on it rippling as she controlled her fury.

Jeff had tried to upset King and her purposely, but there was nothing to do about it. Such competitions were often determined by the war of nerves in the make-up ring, and she wasn't going to lose hers.

She walked King around slowly, waiting for her number to be called and realizing from the cheers of the crowd that the other horses must be doing well. And after she heard the announcer score six clean performances, she realized first place would be determined by which horse was able to complete the course in the shortest time without touching or knocking down any fences.

Jeff's number was called next. Turning his horse in a neat spin toward the gate, he urged Argos into a long trot and swept beyond the gates. Vaguely, Jennifer heard his results: Fifty-one seconds flat.

They called her number then, and steeling herself, she leaned forward, patting King again as she remembered Flint's words. "You'll win. You want this too badly to let anything stand between you and the championship."

Her number was called again, bringing her thoughts sharply to the present and, adjusting her hat, she trotted toward where the ringmaster held the gate open.

Desert King knew the time had come as he pulled at the bit impatiently. They made a small circle just inside the gate before she guided him onto the course. She heard the click of the stopwatch as she passed the starting line and urged Desert

King on to the first jump.

As they approached the first jump his black ears, small and sculptured, stood erect, pointing directly toward it, and he took it eagerly, in a single bound, clearing it easily. He seemed to know what was expected of him, and it was unnecessary for Jennifer to urge him on. And seeing the big horse's excitement and intense spirit, Jennifer, wondering how she could have ever considered losing, leaned low over King's neck and let the big horse have his head.

As they raced across the finish line she felt the applause and cheers ringing in her ears, and when the spectators gave her a standing ovation she stopped to salute the crowd before trotting briskly out the ring exit. All of them could see, even before they heard her time, that hers would be the best.

Already a crowd was gathering around her outside the ring, and with a mixture of pride and a terrible sinking in the pit of her stomach, Jennifer faced Flint as he came out of the stands toward her, his hand being shaken by well-wishers many times before he reached her.

"You were magnificent," he told her, with genuine admiration in his eyes. The constriction in her throat at the sight of his handsome features, at the touch of his hand, wouldn't let her say more than "Thank you," before she reached down to pat King so that her face would be turned away.

Again the applause was thunderous as her time of 50.7 seconds was announced and Jennifer rode King back into the ring, the new champion.

It seemed suddenly as if she might actually be dreaming it all as she cantered Desert King into the center of the ring, where photographers' lights flashed in showers of bright light as she proudly turned King to squarely face the judge's box. A collar of roses was pinned around

his neck and a silver tray was held up to her. More camera flashes went off as she smiled. No one seemed to guess that the tears running down her cheeks were not from happiness.

Jennifer moved steadily through the crowd. "Thank you. Yes. How kind. Yes, thank you."

They were people she had known for years, and yet suddenly none of their words of praise could fill the cavern within her. Even *this* was Flint's triumph. Now he had the ranch, the championship, and even the adoration of these people, she thought, reaching the edge of the crowd and breaking away to lead King to his stall.

Across the barn aisle Argos was being sponged down and stalled by one of Jeff's grooms. The stallion seemed in a nasty temper, pawing and stamping just as if he knew he had lost. He bellowed defiantly, tossing his pure white head so his mane danced like silvery flames about his heavily muscled neck.

Reacting to the stallion's challenge, Desert King tried to pull away, prancing with excitement, so Jennifer took a firmer hand on his rope to guide him into his stall.

"Congratulations, Miss Globe. "You're the best lady rider I've ever seen," the groom said.

She nodded her acknowledgment, smiling wanly, trying to unsnap the lead rope from King's halter and unable to as he pranced in place, his long neck stretched over his stall door, his chest pressed hard against it as he called out again.

"Easy, easy, King," she said, putting a hand on his churning shoulder.

Argos' fierce call rang out again, and this time crashing sounds followed as Argos' hooves hit his own door. The noise continued, enraging King further until,

with a mighty leap, he hit the wooden barrier, popping it open and plunging out in a bound that accelerated into a gallop as he dashed toward Argos' stall.

Jennifer tried to hold the rope, but it was pulled through her hands, burning them before it jerked free and trailed behind King. Hearing King coming, Argos bellowed a louder, more frenzied challenge and kicking his front legs, smashed his own door, bolting through the splintered opening.

Blood was drawn on both horses even before Jennifer could leap after King to catch the end of his halter rope, pulling with all the strength of her shoulders and arms, jerking, leaning all her weight against the rope. But the might of the enraged stallion was such that, with a swing of his neck, she was taken into the air and pulled between the warring giants.

"King," she screamed. But her voice was drowned out by the crash of bodies overhead.

She tried to get to her feet, but found herself knocked down and scrambling again. There was a horrible pain against her leg, then a strange numbness; the cries of stallions accompanied by those of men as everyone nearby gathered around to separate the warring animals. She heard Flint's voice above the others.

A hoof stamped, just missing her ear. Then she was being pulled up and away by the back of her shirt and coat, half dragged, half carried as she heard muffled cursing.

She had already wrapped her arms protectively around her head, and now, pulling down the shield, she saw Flint—question, relief, fury all crossing his pale face.

"Damn it, Jennifer! What a stupid thing to do! Are you all right?"

He loomed over her, his features taut and stricken. "Yes," she nodded. "Yes I'm all right. It's just..."

"Just what? Where are you hurt?"

"I'm all right, I said." She raised herself up and glared at him. "And stop yelling at me. Someone had to separate them, and it didn't look like you were doing anything but celebrating."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't have jumped into the middle of a stallion fight. What's gotten into you, trying to separate them by yourself!"

"I told you not to yell at me!" She stood up, feeling light-headed and swaying slightly, though she covered it by grabbing a nearby saddle rack for support. "Just leave me alone, Flint. You've already done enough without making things worse."

"And where do you think—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, his face changing from brazen confrontation to sudden concern.

He was looking at her torn pants and, following his eyes, she noticed one side was sticking wetly to her leg. Reaching down, she touched it, staring at the fingers that came away red.

"Let me see that leg, Jennifer."

"No!" she said automatically, seeing all her hopes for escaping vanish. "No! No! No!"

But resistance was out of the question when he picked her up and carried her a few steps to an open stall filled high with fresh straw, where he laid her down.

She tried to struggle, but his strength gave no quarter; taking opposite sides of the material in his two hands, he ripped the pants leg open to reveal a gash in her leg and a pulsing rivulet of blood dripping into her boot.

Vaguely she puzzled over the lack of pain before absently recalling that large wounds often remained numb for an extended period. But this thought was over-ridden by Flint as he cursed quietly and called someone over his shoulder.

"Flint." She tried to stand.

"Jennifer, for once in your life shut up

and let something be done for you before you bleed to death." But already his face, the barn, the sounds beyond the stall seemed distant, hazy, then darker, darker, as it seemed she was falling, falling. Vaguely she thought, *I'm going to die, and now he will never know I love him*, before everything disappeared.

"Jennifer, Jennifer." The voice was somewhere over her head, calling her, expecting her to answer. Yet clouds, mist, separated them.

She tried to lift her eyelids, heard someone moan, then realized that it was her own voice.

There was a dark shape over her that slowly focused into a face. Yes, Flint, his eyes full of concern even as he smiled and called her name with a note in it which sent a certain answering vibration into her body.

"Flint," she whispered, lolling her head from side to side. "What? . . . how? . . ." Her eyes circled the room. White. Everything was white, the bed, the curtains, even the telephone and the stand where it rested. "I thought I'd died," she said, recalling how she had dropped into the darkening tunnel in what seemed only the moment before.

"Well, so I see you're awake."

Both Jennifer and Flint turned to see a tall gray-haired man standing in the doorway, a doctor by his clothes, who came into the room and peered down at her.

Flint introduced them. "This is Dr. Saben."

The doctor smiled down at her. "You've given Mr. Michaels here quite a scare. He hasn't left this room for twenty-four hours." He smiled more broadly. "And I'm particularly glad to see you've recovered. I certainly didn't want to be the one who had to pry him away from you if your stay turned out to be extended."

Still smiling, Dr. Saben came closer and

bending, listened to her heart and took her pulse. "You're fine now," he pronounced, "at least fine enough to leave here, though you'll have to stay in bed for at least a week."

"When, when can I go h—" She glanced at Flint, remembering suddenly that the ranch was no longer her home. "When can I leave the hospital?"

"By tomorrow morning, I think, if everything remains normal. But you will have to promise only bed rest until that leg is well on its way to healing." He turned to Flint. "You'll see she's taken care of?"

Flint nodded, and Jennifer noticed the firm look in his eyes.

"Nice meeting you, Jennifer," the doctor was saying before nodding to Flint. "And you too, Mr. Michaels." Then he was gone.

Jennifer remained silent as the doctor's words sank in, bringing her dilemma into focus again. Well, Flint could think that he was going to keep her under his control, but he wasn't. And something within her that for a moment had been vulnerable was now forced to harden. She turned away from him, refusing to look at the face that had become so beloved.

"I want to leave here, Flint," she said at last in a low serious voice.

"Good! I'll take you tomorrow." He walked to the closet. "Your clothes are here." He held up the torn, blood-stained breeches. "The blouse is okay, but these are hardly wearable. I bought you some jeans to wear home," he said, seeming completely offhand, as if nothing had changed.

"Flint. . . I'm not going to the ranch. I've decided to leave."

He looked at her as if she had just said something more than slightly ridiculous. "And where were you planning on going? You can't get out of bed for a week."

"I'm not sure. I'll have to make arrangements. I have friends I can stay

with," she said, with all the firmness her decidedly weak voice could muster. She wished that somehow he would stop searching her face with those eyes—why did they have to look at her so... in a way that wound around her heart, casting a special spell all its own?

"I want you to stay, Jennifer," he said firmly.

"Why?" she asked at last. "Why do you want me to stay on the ranch?" She sighed long and sat up higher. "Look," she began, feeling suddenly able to face the situation square on. "I don't want to go back to Casa Contenta. I've already told you what I want. And now I realize that, since you don't care—I mean I understand what you want, but it just isn't what I want."

His eyes had turned a deep emerald and remained filled with that certain compelling light that bypassed all rational thought. Then he smiled. "I think, Jennifer, that you're a fool, as big a fool as I am—no, don't interrupt me," he said, motioning her to keep quiet and moving to hitch one hip on the edge of the bed, where he eased himself down to a sitting position.

He took her so much smaller hand in his and stroked the back of her knuckles. "I want you to stay on the ranch, Jennifer, and not just to train horses, but to be with me. I want you... I want to make you happy. Haven't you ever realized that was what I wanted?"

She didn't have a chance to say no as he continued. "You are the only woman I've ever really wanted." He pulled her to a sitting position, into the warmth and

strength of his arms. "Don't you see what I'm trying to tell you?" And when she only shook her head, her eyes wide, afraid to put into words what the miraculous lifting of her heart told her, he leaned closer and said, "I love you."

Jennifer stared. So simple, three words "But why didn't you tell me?" she asked at last. "Why did you let me think..."

"Why?" His eyebrows raised incredulously. "Do you have any idea how aloof you've been? You're as skittish as that filly of yours. Just when I thought I was making progress, everything would fall apart. I thought that experiencing our love physically would make a difference, but afterward you were as cold as ever. I was afraid if I told you how I felt you would bolt."

The joy in her bubbled over into a laugh. "We've both been fools," she said.

He squeezed her close, yet with infinite gentleness. "Then we'll consider this a beginning," he said firmly.

"A beginning?"

"Yes, our beginning. We're going to spend our life together sharing our dreams and ourselves, a life of building, among other things, the finest Arabian ranch in the country, if that's what you want."

She nodded. "Yes, the finest."

As he kissed her Jennifer felt all doubts and thoughts of the past being swept away before the tenderness in that caress and suddenly, smiling inwardly, Jennifer considered that their first week of "beginning" was not going to seem nearly long enough. ♥



Thief of Hearts

Between luscious kisses, Wade Cunningham insists that Candy Lewis get her life in order. But her goat needs a home, she's been arrested for assault, and Wade is rapidly stealing her heart!

JAN MATHEWS

Damn! You could never find a policeman in Chicago when you needed one, thought Candace Lewis, running down the street wearing a skimpy, red satin costume, a spider monkey clinging to her back.

She paused to catch her breath and pull off her red spike-heeled shoes. Her side was aching. But Mr. Becker was gaining on her! He had just rounded the corner, shouting obscenities. She paused momentarily in front of a tall office building, spotted the revolving door, and dashed

through the door, across the foyer, and into an elevator just as the doors slid closed. The security guard didn't have a chance to question her, or to respond to Mr. Becker's shouted, "Stop her! Stop that woman!"

Flinching from the monkey's claws, which dug into her bare shoulder, Candy juggled her parasol and tambourine, and switched the monkey to her head, letting it cling to her long blond hair. At the top floor she rushed off the elevator and glanced around hurriedly for a stairway

exit, but a quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that the other elevator was fast approaching.

Without hesitating a moment longer, she opened the first door she came to and slipped into a room. Thank God it was after closing hours—about six-thirty—and no one was around. Several desks, all neat and tidy for the night, formed a row down the length of the room. On the far wall were five other doors. She chose the third.

She ducked through the entrance and leaned against the wall with her eyes closed. When her pulse had slowed and she had caught her breath, she detached the monkey from her head and straightened up to take stock of her surroundings. Oh, my God, she wasn't alone!

On the far side of the room stood a large mahogany desk, and behind the desk sat a very attractive man.

Although the room was lit by only a desk lamp, she could see him clearly. A suit jacket was tossed carelessly over the back of a chair. His vest was unbuttoned, and his tie hung loosely around his neck. The white of his shirt contrasted with his tanned complexion, and his eyes were a deep, clear blue.

"Oh, Lord," Candy breathed.

If the man was surprised by her sudden intrusion, he didn't show it. She flushed. She usually wore a trench coat over her provocative costume, but she'd left her coat in Mr. Becker's office when he'd started to chase her.

For a moment neither she nor the unidentified man spoke. They simply stared at each other. Then Fly, the monkey, started to jump up and down, chattering wildly. Candy grabbed for the leash and dropped her parasol. When she picked it up, the darned thing flew open. The clasp must have broken when she'd hit Mr. Becker over the head.

She needed time. Mr. Becker would

undoubtedly arrive at any moment. She flipped up the parasol and smiled. "Hi. I'm Mary Poppins."

A grin twitched at the corners of the man's lips. "Good of you to drop by, Mary," he replied. "I'm Wade Cunningham. What can I do for you? A legal brief, perhaps?"

"Nothing today, thank you," she answered, playing along. She smiled again, hoping for a miracle. "I just stopped in to say hello."

"There must be something I can do for you," he went on, unobtrusively picking up the telephone receiver. "Would you like to rest a moment?" he asked. "Have a seat. I'll just make this call, and then we can chat."

As the man began to dial, Fly swung around to dangle from Candy's bodice, but she ignored the primate and stared frantically at the dark, attractive man. Good Lord, was he calling the authorities?

She rushed forward and placed a hand on his arm, startled at the electricity that seemed to arc between them. "Please don't call the police." She pulled back quickly, oddly disconcerted. "I tried to find a police officer a few minutes ago, but now the police probably wouldn't believe me, and I'm sure the security guard is angry because I slipped past him. If you'll just show me a way out, I'll leave. It has to be a rear exit though. If Mr. Becker finds me, he'll strangle Fly."

"Fly?" The man paused. "Oh, of course, the monkey."

"Yes," she rushed on desperately, fully aware of how she must appear—either crazy, dangerous, or both. But she had to make him believe her. "You see, I couldn't leave Fly home. She gets into fights with Tweety. I can't leave her in the apartment, not even with Suzie. I'm only taking care of her until a zoo adopts her, but she might have leukemia and she can't

go to the zoo unless she's healthy." Candy grabbed for the monkey, who had jumped from her arms onto the desk. "Darn it, Fly. Come here!"

The monkey chattered excitedly and moved out of reach, taking refuge on the man's lap. "Maybe you'd better put her down," Candy said quickly. "She's not always... polite."

"She's fine." He patted Fly's fuzzy brown head. "Please go on. This is a fascinating story."

Candy anxiously chewed her lip. The same accident couldn't happen twice in one day, she assured herself.

"You see," she began again, "I work for Merry Message service and I was in the middle of singing 'Happy Birthday' to Mr. Becker in his office when Fly got loose. Mr. Becker thought she was cute, so he began petting her. I tried to catch her, but she got scared, and that's bad, because when she's scared, she..."

Her voice trailed off. From the look on Wade's face, she realized with dismay that there had been another accident.

"I think I know what happened," he said slowly, holding Fly away from him and standing up awkwardly.

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry," Candy whispered. "Her bladder should have been pretty empty. She just went a few minutes ago."

"Don't give it another thought," he said.

"I'm so sorry! I don't know what gets into her." She gestured helplessly.

"Did you leave your Mr. Becker in similar trouble?"

She shook her head. "Worse. I gave back the diamond stickpin, but he was still furious. When he tried to strangle Fly, I grabbed the monkey and my parasol and ran. I left my coat in his office."

"Fly took his diamond stickpin?"

"Yes, but I gave it back."

"Does she steal things often?"

"I'm not sure. I've been taking care of her for only a couple of weeks. I think the diamond attracted her because it was shiny." Candy's heart sank. "Oh, gosh, are you missing anything?"

"Only my better judgment," he mumbled.

"What?" Nervously, she looked over her shoulder.

"Never mind. Tell me," he went on, gesturing at her costume, "were you walking down the street in that?"

"I wasn't walking, I was running. I didn't know where to go."

"What I mean is, well, your outfit is rather... brief. You're lucky you weren't attacked."

Flushing again, she glanced down at the red satin costume that fit her like a second skin. The front dipped low, and the skirt barely covered her hips. But at the moment she was more concerned about being caught. "Yes, I guess it is brief. It's called The Birthday Bunny."

"I see." Wade crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the corner of the desk. For a moment his eyes sparkled with amusement, though his expression remained somber. "What other costumes do you wear... on the job?"

Hadn't anyone ever sent him a singing telegram? Candy answered automatically, more intent on how to get out of the room: "There's the Anniversary Antelope and the Get-Well Shell and the Thank-You Gnu. But the Birthday Bunny is the most popular."

"No doubt," he agreed, nodding seriously. "Aren't you afraid Mr. Becker will track you down through the message service? His pants were probably ruined too."

Candy frowned thoughtfully. If so, she might lose her job over the incident. "I'm hoping he'll calm down when he can't find me. Of course, the service will deduct the cleaning bill from my salary. Listen,"

she went on, forcing a smile, "I want to thank you for being so nice about all this. When I came running in here, you must have thought I was crazy."

"I was wondering where you might have escaped from, Mary."

"My name is Candy, Candace Lewis. And I should be going now."

"So soon?" he asked, smiling warmly at her. "What about Mr. Becker? He might be waiting for you."

"I'm sure he's gone by now."

"Are you married?" he asked her out of the blue.

She hesitated, then, as was her habit lately, suppressed the memories he had inadvertently aroused. "Divorced. How about you?"

"I'm considered a confirmed bachelor. If you'll wait a minute while I clean up, I'll see that you get home safely. You and that monkey are a hazardous combination. It's my duty as a responsible citizen to protect innocent people. And I'll lend you my jacket."

"That's very nice of you." Candy supposed that under the circumstances she'd better accept the offer. Smiling wanly, she sat down in the chair he had indicated. Just then, with a gleeful grin, Fly opened her palm to reveal a shiny stone.

"Oh, good grief!" Horrified, Candy stared at Mr. Becker's diamond. The stone must have fallen out of his stickpin when Fly had first stolen it. No wonder Becker had been so angry. What was she going to do now? She couldn't go back to his office, and she doubted he had given up the chase, since the diamond looked expensive.

Wade let out an astonished whistle.

"What am I going to do?" Candy wailed, all of her previous desperation returning tenfold.

"The wise thing would be to return the diamond."

"I can't. I can't go back there."

"How about sending it by messenger? I use Executive-Courier all the time. They're very reliable. Give me a minute and I'll make the arrangements."

While he reached for the telephone, Candy glanced around the plush office. The draperies probably cost more than all the furniture in her entire apartment, and the rug was so thick that her toes sank into the pile.

"All set," he said, as he hung up the phone. "If someone knocks, come get me. I won't be long. I'm going to try to salvage my pants."

"Thank you again. It's very nice of you to help me."

"You're welcome. I'm a nice man."

"I'll bet." She laughed nervously, ridiculously disturbed by the sight of him. "What did you say your name was?"

"Wade Cunningham," he answered, disappearing into another room.

"Of Cunningham, Cunningham, Cunningham, Abernathy, and Finch?" she called, naming one of the most prestigious law firms in the city.

"Yes. Have you heard of us?"

"How could I help it? Your name's listed on the financial page of the newspaper every day." She leaned forward and listened, confused by sounds of running water.

"Abernathy is my mother's cousin, and Cunningham and Cunningham are my father and grandfather," he called out.

"Nice." Suddenly she wondered what she was doing in an office with someone she didn't even know. He could be Jack the Ripper, or even worse to her mind, a modern day Don Juan. She stood and began pacing the room.

"Why do you work for a message service?" Wade asked moments later as he walked back into the office. Beads of water dripped from his dark hair as he

toweled it dry. Around his body was wrapped a short terry-cloth robe.

Feeling herself turn red, and trying to appear nonchalant, she leaned against the wall, thinking she'd been looking at the pictures.

"Is there a shower in there?"

"Of course." He shrugged. "This is an executive suite and I'm a famous lawyer. When I appear in court I have to look neat and well groomed."

"You do."

"Do which?"

"Look neat and well groomed."

Strange, she hadn't realized before exactly how attractive he was. He was quite tall, lean, firm, and well-proportioned. Even his toes were well shaped. How did a lawyer get that kind of build?

"I guess it's my turn now to say thanks," he said. "It's funny, but our conversation seems to be full of apologies and expressions of gratitude."

"That's because we don't know each other."

"A situation easily rectified." He grinned.

The monkey chose that moment to laugh. Candy agreed. The entire incident was crazy.

Candy lived just south of the loop near Lake Michigan, in a neighborhood as eclectic as the city. When they had climbed the stairs to her hallway, Candy could hear sounds of madcap activity coming from her living room. The dog was barking, music was playing loud enough to mask the sound of a jackhammer. She opened the door. Jason, her friend Leona's son, immediately revved up his Mean Machine, a low-riding plastic tricycle, and barreled into her.

Aggressive behavior is a sign of genius; she reminded herself. How many times had Jason's mother told her that? Leona would be furious if Candy disciplined the child. She gritted her teeth and tousled the

five-year-old's golden curls. "Hi, Jason. Have you been a good boy for the babysitter?"

"No. Ruum, ruum. Errhhh." He backed up the green contraption and smashed it into a table.

Wade, standing in the doorway, gave a polite grimace. "Hello, Jason. It's nice to meet you. My, aren't you a fine young man."

"No, I'm not! I'm a kid."

Candy stuck out her foot to halt the progress of the Mean Machine and gave Wade a wan smile.

"Hi, Ms. Lewis," thirteen-year-old Suzie, the babysitter, called over the noise. "Jason was a real pain today. Do you need me tomorrow?"

"Please." Candy pulled out several dollars and handed the money to the girl, who was snapping gum and sizing up Wade with the frankness of a precocious teenager. She looked back at Candy.

"Awesome," she said.

Candy glanced at Wade, too. "Totally. How's eight tomorrow morning?"

"You know I won't babysit for the monkey."

"Don't worry, I'll take her along."

Candy put Fly in her cage. As soon as she turned her back, the monkey promptly reached through the mesh and began to fiddle with the latch. It usually took her five minutes to open the door and escape. "Where's Tweety?" Candy asked.

"Asleep on the bookshelves." Suzie popped her gum and headed for the door, trying to sway her hips provocatively on her way out. "See ya around, big guy."

Candy turned to Wade. "She's in eighth grade," she explained in response to his expression of amused discomfiture. "She's just learning to flirt."

"I'm flattered. Is that Tweety?" he asked, gesturing toward a large white Persian cat curled up on an empty bookshelf.

"Yes." Candy reached up to retrieve

the cat. Wade was still standing in the doorway. Even frowning, he looked handsome.

"She has unusual blue eyes."

"Those are cataracts. She's nearly blind. That's why it's so difficult to find a home for her."

"You mean these animals aren't yours?"

"No, I'm just keeping them until someone adopts them."

"Candy, who's going to adopt a blind cat?"

"Oh, I don't know." She shrugged. "The Abandoned Animal Welfare League will find someone. In the meantime, none of them is a real problem."

"Don't you get emotionally attached to them?"

"They're not mine, so I can't allow myself to form real attachments." As she spoke, Jason peeled out on his Mean Machine with a flurry of high-pitched screeches.

Wade quickly sidestepped the child and glanced at her, his smile stiff. "He's quite a human dynamo. You must be exhausted by the end of the evening."

"Yes, he's a handful." Jason circled again, wheeling across the room. "Why don't you get your building blocks, honey?" she suggested.

Jason paused, pouting. "I want to make a skyscraper."

Candy was accustomed to his difficult personality. She'd taken care of him off and on for Leona since he was an infant. "Fine, we'll make a skyscraper. You can crash it when we're done."

After the child had scampered into the other room, Wade said, "You have a nice apartment."

"Thank you. It's small, but I don't need much room."

For a moment he stared at her with an odd expression. Then he gestured to the dog, who was still howling in the kitchen

behind the child gate she had erected. He was part Saint Bernard and part Great Dane, and he still thought he was a puppy. "His name is Rover," she told Wade, letting the dog out of the kitchen. Rover jumped on her, his tongue lolling and his tail wagging.

"Candy, do you realize Fly is opening the latch on her cage?"

"Yes, she does that all the time."

"Don't you have any twister seals?"

She looked at him blankly. Rover had romped from her to Wade, who knelt and held the animal firmly.

"What do you want with one?"

Wade looked up from scratching the dog's ears. "You know, Candace Lewis, you need to add some sanity to your life. You can use the twister seals to keep the cage door closed. I don't think monkeys can figure out how to untwist wire."

Just then, Fly succeeded in opening the cage. With a piercing shriek, she bounded out, seemed to fly across the room, and landed with a thud on Wade's head. The look of shock on his face made Candy burst out laughing. "Oh, no," he said, grasping the monkey and holding her at arm's length. "No, you don't. Not again."

Once they had calmed Fly down and returned her to her cage, Candy turned to Wade and asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"Is it normal, everyday coffee, or some madcap brew?"

Candy laughed. After all she'd subjected him to today, he had every right to be suspicious. "The only thing I do differently is grind my own beans. It's a Peruvian blend."

"That sounds safe enough."

Excusing herself, Candy went into the kitchen:

"I see you're a registered nurse," Wade called, from the living room, where he'd

obviously seen her diploma on the wall.
"Don't you work as a nurse?"

"No."

"Why not?" He was standing in the doorway, looking puzzled.

She shrugged and turned away. "It's a long, boring story."

"I have all night."

The subject of nursing was too upsetting for her to talk about. Two years ago, after her husband, Marc, had left her and after another premature baby she'd worked with had died, she'd said to hell with the stress, the frustration, the unhappiness and disappointment, the absolute wretchedness of her life and her profession.

"The coffee will be ready in a minute," she said with forced brightness, changing the subject. "Would you mind checking on Jason? I get nervous when I don't hear him."

Wade studied her for several interminable moments. "All right," he said finally.

Candy took a long time to fix the coffee, trying to compose herself. Then she became aware of loud exclamations coming from the living room. When she entered, holding a tray, Wade, stern faced, was standing face to face with a screaming Jason.

She shot Wade a dark look before she hugged the child and comforted him. It wasn't long before he had forgotten the incident, whatever it was, and started playing again.

She turned to Wade. "What on earth did you do?"

"Me? What did *I* do? The question should be what did *he* do! Candy, I know it's none of my business, but that child is rude, overbearing, and undisciplined!"

She sighed. "I know. Leona keeps telling me he's brilliant and that he should be allowed free expression, but he can be unbearable. He is cute, though."

"Cute?" Wade echoed incredulously. "What's cute about a monster?"

"Shhh. Wade, he'll hear you."

"Hear me?" He ran a hand through his hair in an impatient gesture. "Hear me? Candy, I've known overprotective mothers, but your son just *bit* me, and you're concerned I'll wound his ego?"

"My son?"

"Your son"—he pointed to Jason—"bit me because I was going to put a top on the skyscraper."

She laughed, knowing immediately what had happened. "He doesn't like tops. The building falls over before he can knock it down. And he's not—"

"Excuse me, Candy, but that's not the point. You need to exercise some control over your child. You need to exercise some control over your life!"

His criticism struck a raw nerve. The audacity of the man! It was her life, and she would live it any damned way she pleased! "I can't do that," she said stiffly.

"Why not?" Wade glared angrily at her, his irritation with the child obviously extending to her. But Candy wasn't concerned with his ire. He was making her feel things she didn't want to feel, think about things she didn't want to acknowledge. She had worked hard to put her problems behind her, and she resented his interference, however unintentional.

"As far as my life is concerned," she said defensively, "I like it just the way it is. I'm sorry about what happened today, both in your office and here, and I appreciate your help, but no one tells me how to live my life. Certainly not some stuffy old lawyer! As far as Jason is concerned," she went on in a quieter voice, "I can't discipline him. It's not my responsibility or my privilege. He's not my child. I'm just watching him for a few days for some friends of mine who live downstairs. Gus and Leona are on a lecture tour."

There was a moment of silence while Wade digested her words. "Let me get this straight. You're watching Jason for your

friends downstairs. And you're providing a foster home for the dog and the cat and the monkey."

"Yes." The way he phrased things made her sound stupid, but matters of friendship and obligation were involved, which he didn't understand. Gus and Leona had helped her through a difficult period of her life. Whatever she could do for them was minor compared to what they had done for her. And the animals had been abandoned. She was just providing temporary care.

An even longer silence followed. Finally Wade smiled and sat down on the sofa. "And you make Peruvian coffee?"

What an odd comment to make in the middle of an argument. "Did Jason hurt you?" she asked, sitting down also.

"Just my pride. You know, I thought Jason was your son, and I wanted to impress him."

"I'm sorry. I should have explained. It didn't occur to me that you would think he was my son. I'm sorry Jason bit you, too. He's their only child and, you're right, he does need discipline."

"Do you have any more surprises?"

"I think that's all. Oh, the dog has high blood sugar."

He laughed. "Poor Rover."

Candy glanced at Wade and smiled. "Do you have any pets?"

"Horrors! The housekeeper would quit."

They laughed together as Wade described the long parade of household help that marched through his home during his childhood. The last one had been Zoe, who had quit because of a teenaged prank in which he'd taken a risqué photo of her and printed it in the centerfold of the school paper. Finally, his mother had threatened to take away the family car and his driver's license if he didn't behave. They'd had the same housekeeper, Olga, ever since.

Suddenly, a surprised expression crossed Wade's features.

"Is something wrong?" Candy asked.

"It just occurred to me that I was as rude, overbearing, and undisciplined as our little friend Jason. No wonder Wade Senior and Junior doubted I'd make it through law school."

"You're Wade Cunningham the Third?"

"It's a terrible cross to bear. As I understand it, when my father and grandfather were kids they were just as badly behaved."

"Do you live with your family?"

"Yes, I do, at our estate in Kenilworth. It might strike you as strange, but rich people live together—generations of them on vast ranches. We don't have any cows, but we have a lot of land, and I assure you, I am not a Mamma's boy. Nor am I financially dependent on my family. In addition to the central portion of the house, each of us, except Uncle Albert and Aunt Annabelle, has our own wing, complete with a minikitchen, laundry room, and living and dining facilities. I even have etchings," he said, arching his eyebrows.

"You are bad, Wade," she said, laughing.

He laughed with her, then asked, "Are you from Chicago?"

"I've lived in so many places, I can't count them all. I came to Chicago after I graduated from college, to work in the neonatal intensive care unit at County Memorial Hospital with premature babies..."

Candy turned away, and her voice drifted off. She thought of little Jane Doe, so tiny and alone, and of all the other babies she'd held and cared for. When she turned back, Wade was staring intently at her. She thought he was going to kiss her, but all he did was trace the outline of her lips with his finger.

"I guess I'd better be going now, Candy," he said in a low, husky voice. The deep, lazy tone gave her goosebumps. "Don't forget to add a few new twister seals to Fly's cage in the morning. She can't cause any trouble if she's locked up."

Feeling dazed, Candy stood in the doorway for a long time after he'd left. She mustn't see Wade Cunningham again. He was far too dangerous—too handsome, too suave, too damned attractive for her to handle. She had enough problems, and she had a long history of being rejected. Although she had realized in the past several months that the divorce hadn't been entirely her fault, her failed marriage still haunted her. Marcus Allen Lewis had taught her a bitter lesson.

The next morning at work, Candy was arrested. Smiling, the policeman showed her his badge. "I'm awfully sorry, but you've been charged with assault and battery."

"Assault and battery!" she repeated. Candy felt herself go pale. "Mr. Becker pressed charges?"

"I'm afraid so." Although the police officer was polite and concerned, he explained that he was obligated to arrest her. He told her she could then post bond and wait for a hearing.

"You might call a lawyer," he suggested when they arrived at the police station. "Quite often these matters can be settled quickly out of court."

Calling Wade seemed the logical thing to do. He could at least act as a character witness for her.

Once she made the call, Candy paced the floor for the next forty-five minutes, alternately sure Wade would arrive at any moment and certain he wouldn't show up at all. She'd just about given up when he strode into the station. He looked taller and even more masculine than she

remembered. The sheer impact of seeing him again made her shaky.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "I hope you weren't busy. Mr. Becker pressed charges."

"As a public nuisance?" he asked, a charming, crooked grin on his face.

"Assault and battery."

Wade's expression sobered. "I see." He paused. "Candy, what did you do to him?"

"I hit him with my parasol. He was going to hurt Fly." She sat down on a wooden bench and blinked back tears. "I didn't swing hard."

Wade sat down beside her and pulled her into his arms. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll take care of everything. Just let me speak to the arresting officer for a few minutes, and then I'll take you home."

By the time Wade had settled things, Candy regained her poise. Things didn't look so bleak after all. The police had allowed her to write a personal check for bond, and she wouldn't have to appear in court for a few weeks. That gave her some time to make money in case she lost her case—and her job.

Back at her apartment, Candy invited Wade to stay for lunch, but he said he could only stay for a few minutes.

"Would you like to try a good seafood restaurant one of these nights?" he asked, brushing his fingers along her throat, the husky note in his deep voice thrilling her. How could people listen to that beautiful voice in court and pay attention to what he was saying?

"That sounds like fun."

"Maybe we could go dancing, too." He was seducing her with his voice.

When the phone rang, she welcomed the intrusion.

"Excuse me," she stammered. "I have to get that."

Wade laughed and followed her into

the living room. She glanced nervously at him as she talked, watching the way he walked—smooth, lithe, with no wasted motions. He was grinning at her, a devastating half-smile that tugged at her heartstrings. Why did he make her feel as if she might lose her soul? Quickly, she turned away, trying to figure out who was calling. Then, as she realized who was on the other end, she paid close attention.

“A goat? I’m not sure, Mary. How would I take care of it?”

Now Wade was paying close attention, too. “You don’t have a yard, Candy,” he said, sotto voce.

She turned back to the phone. “I don’t have a yard.” Mary said something else, and she glanced up at Wade.

“You don’t have hay either.”

“I don’t have hay either,” she said. “I know it’s a shame. Yes, I hate to see the animal destroyed, too.” Candy chewed her lip. Why was she such a soft touch? Suddenly, she had an idea. “Hang on, Mary. Wade, can I see your driver’s license?”

“My driver’s license?” he echoed, but he reached into his pocket and handed her the laminated card.

“Your picture is as bad as mine,” she commented. Then into the phone she said, “Mary, deliver the goat to 510 Lakeview Drive in Kenilworth. Yes, I’m certain they have a yard.” She hung up quickly.

A tiny muscle was twitching in Wade’s cheek, and he was glaring at her. “Candy, call right back and arrange to have that goat taken somewhere else.”

“Wade, Mary said they’re going to destroy Billie unless she can arrange an immediate foster home for him. I’ll find somewhere else for it to go, I promise. Please, just for a few days? I’ll bet Olga will love Billie. And just think, you won’t have to mow your lawn.”

Wade continued to glare at her, but his

eyes, sparkling with mischievous glints, gave him away, and he was having a hard time keeping his mouth straight. “Candy, if Olga quits, my mother will be furious.”

Smiling, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly on the lips. “Thank you, Wade! You’ll see. The goat won’t be a problem at all.”

In one swift movement Wade pulled her tighter against his chest. “It’s my own fault. I should have called the police yesterday instead of helping you out. I should have known that any woman who pretends to be Mary Poppins is bound to be trouble. And if you’re going to kiss me in appreciation,” he added, his voice husky as his lips slowly descended to hers, “do it right.”

When Wade left, Candy stared after him a long time, pondering her reaction to his kiss. It surprised her to realize that she had been devastated. That he was attractive and charming and terribly sexy was hard to deny, but she had no intention of getting involved again.

That afternoon, Candy went to visit Mr. Callahan, an elderly man who had once lived in her building. He had children, but not one of them wanted him now that he was getting old and feeble, and they had arranged for him to live in a nursing home.

Candy tried to visit him there once a week, but being abandoned had made the old man depressed, and he just lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. It hurt her to see him so lonely; it dredged up so many of her own painful memories that each visit became harder and harder to make and she hadn’t gone in several weeks.

When she arrived, the nurses at the rest home told her that he was going swiftly downhill. There was nothing physically wrong with him, but he had given up on life.

"Has his family visited?" Candy asked.

"No, but his grandniece called. She's due back from England any day. Mr. Callahan seemed to perk up a bit afterward, but now he's despondent again. He won't eat, he doesn't sleep well, and he won't talk either. He just lies there and stares at the ceiling. Maybe you can get him to respond."

Getting Mr. Callahan to respond was going to be a monumental task, Candy realized when she sat down at his bedside and held the old man's hand. If it weren't for an occasional flicker of his eyelids and the slight rise and fall of his chest, she would have sworn he was a statue. He was lost somewhere deep inside himself.

Carrying on a one-sided conversation, she talked for a long time, telling him about Fly, the goat, and about how nice Wade Cunningham had been.

Mr. Callahan still didn't speak, but when she started to leave, he did blink several times.

"I'll be back tomorrow," she said, leaning down to kiss his wrinkled cheek. "I'll bring you some red-hots. We'll gorge out on sweets. Okay?"

The old man blinked, and as Candy left she thought she saw tears in his eyes.

That evening, despite her vow not to think about Wade, a thrill of pleasure shot through her when she answered the telephone and heard his voice.

He told her that he had spoken with Mr. Becker, who refused to drop charges, and that her court date was the next Friday. To discuss their strategy, Wade said, he would pick her up at six the next evening for dinner.

At four the next afternoon, Candy called Wade's office. All day she'd thought about him and realized that she had to find another lawyer. Being around Wade Cunningham was dangerous.

"Candy! I'm glad you called," he said in his deep, husky voice. "I hope you don't mind, but I canceled our dinner reservations."

Mind? she almost blurted. She was delighted.

"I'll still pick you up at six, though. We'll have dinner at the house."

"The house? *Your* house?" she asked in dismay. "Up in Kenilworth?"

"No," he said, chuckling, "at my harem in Saudi Arabia. Candy, what's wrong with Kenilworth?"

"I don't have a problem with Kenilworth. I was just confused," she said hurriedly. "But I can't come."

"Candy, why?"

Because you're devastatingly attractive and terribly charming and I don't want to be alone with you, she said to herself.

He didn't wait for her to answer. "We need to talk about our courtroom strategy," he said, "and we have to do something about Billie. He ate a Dieffenbachia plant this morning, and Mother is furious. I think it would be a good idea if we tried to soothe her temper. I'm hoping that if you talk to her, she'll consent to letting him stay for a few more days."

Talk about a trap. "Okay," she agreed reluctantly. "But I'd prefer to meet you at your house. I'll borrow Gus and Leona's car." She would have to find a way to stay out of his arms.

Candy didn't often make preconceived judgments about people, but the obvious wealth and social stature of Wade's family had led her to assume they would be stuffy and unlikable. She soon realized, with much chagrin, that she'd been guilty of stereotyping and Wade hadn't disabused her and her preconceptions.

But Miriam Cunningham was delightful, not at all disturbed by the goat, and not in the least constrained by social conventions.

Wade's father was an entirely different

matter. Preoccupied with his newspaper, he looked up only occasionally to address the assemblage. Candy couldn't help but wonder if he wore his three-piece suit to bed.

A sparkle in the eye of Wade Senior, the grandfather, made Candy suspect that, although formal, he was actually a charming old rake.

"Ah, the little girl with the goat," he said when they were introduced. "I understand you're one of our clients now."

She stiffened at his calling her a little girl, but smiled politely. "Wade has been kind enough to represent me."

"The boy is a bastion of virtue."

She didn't have a chance to wonder about his sarcasm. Charles Abernathy and Albert Finch, along with their wives, arrived angry and stonefaced.

"So you're the young lady with the goat," Charles Abernathy said stiffly, reluctantly holding out his hand, as though afraid she might have a communicable disease.

Candy smiled wanly. She seemed to have gained a certain notoriety with Wade's family.

Wade stood beside her, leaning against the fireplace mantel, regarding her mixed reactions to his family with amusement.

They ate dinner in a formal dining room that was as large as Candy's whole apartment. Candy found herself seated between Wade and Charles Abernathy.

"Candace," Albert Finch said. "My, that's an unusual name. But Lewis is rather common."

Candy shrugged. "Yes, I suppose so."

"What is your heritage, my dear?"

"Heritage?"

"Your background," he clarified.

"Rather pedestrian, I'm afraid," she answered. "Heinz 57."

"Heinz?" Albert Finch smiled politely.

"Albert has traced his origins back to

England," Wade's grandfather said, winking at her.

Finch was beaming. "I'm related to the Queen of England. Distantly, of course. So is Miriam."

"How nice," Candy said.

"And your family? Is it old? I've never heard of a Heinz."

"Varieties, Albert," Wade's grandfather answered for her. "Heinz 57 varieties. That means her background is varied, just like vegetable soup."

Astounded, she glanced at Wade's grandfather, not knowing whether to laugh or be insulted. Just then, Wade's hand slipped casually onto her thigh. For a moment she was stunned. They were sitting at a formal dinner with his family! She crossed her legs away from him, but Wade's hand followed as Albert Finch added, "Miriam tells me you're involved in the Abandoned Animal Welfare League. Marvelous charity."

"You've heard of us?" Candy asked.

"Why, of course," Albert said. "What do you intend to do with the goat?"

So that's where Albert had been aiming the conversation.

"I hope to find Billie a home," Candy said. "Do you know anyone who might be interested in taking him on?"

"You have a yard, Uncle Albert," Wade pointed out, his hand slipping higher.

"Gracious, no," Albert objected. "What would we do with a goat?"

"Perhaps you could give Candy a donation, then," Miriam suggested.

"Miriam, I must say, although you're my sister, you're a shrewd woman. I never come here but what I don't end up giving you a donation for something. I would be delighted to contribute." Albert Finch turned to Candy. "Shall I write you a check?"

"Why, thank you. A check would be fine," Candy answered.

Albert smiled again. As long as I'm in an expansive mood, how much do you want for the Needy Children Fund, Miriam?"

Wade's mother received a check for the Needy Children and another for the Heart Fund. As it turned out, Miriam was involved in so many charities, Candy wondered how she managed to keep them all straight. But work she did, making phone calls, accepting contributions, organizing mail campaigns, dinners, and speeches.

They chatted over coffee, and then Wade scraped back his chair. "If you'll excuse us," he said. "Candy and I need to discuss our courtroom strategy for her upcoming case. I thought we might use the study."

Candy's heart took a nose dive. She didn't want to be alone with him, but how could she gracefully decline?

Miriam Cunningham smiled. "Wade, you're always so practical, just like your father. Those old legal matters. That's all you lawyers think about. You need to learn to loosen up a bit. It's a lovely night. Why don't you go for a walk along the beach? I'm sure Candy would enjoy that more than talking shop. It's not as if you don't have time to prepare her case. You have a week."

Evidently, Miriam didn't know her son very well. If Wade got any looser, Candy could charge him with indecency.

"Excellent idea, Mother. Perhaps we'll check on Billie on our way out." Wade held out his hand for Candy. "After that, I might even show her my etchings."

"Isn't that sweet?" Wade's aunt Anabelle said. "Oh, you're so fortunate, Candace. Wade doesn't allow many people to see his artwork."

They did walk on the beach, and she did end up in his arms for a delirious moment. Still, she managed to keep things

light, for she knew she couldn't allow this man to penetrate her defenses. But she was halfway home before she realized that, once again, they hadn't discussed the strategy for her case. She would have to call Wade in the morning, but she would have to figure out how to keep him at arms length. Were all lawyers as crafty as he was? The man was devastatingly attractive, and he scared the daylight out of her. Falling for him would be so easy. Just as easy as falling for Marc had been. And that episode in her life, short though it had been, had created the deepest wound.

Marcus Allen Lewis had been one of the most attractive men she'd ever met. The day she married him she'd thought she was the luckiest woman in the world. He was thoughtful, easygoing, romantic, and an all-around good guy who loved everyone. Including an entire stable of other women, she discovered two months later.

Marc was incapable of making a commitment to any one person. Oh, he'd loved her. The day he'd walked out on her he'd grinned and waved, as if they were going on separate vacations rather than ending their marriage. He'd even kissed her and declared his eternal devotion. She hadn't heard from him again, except when she received the divorce papers.

A week later, baby Janie had died in her arms. The premature infant had been abandoned in an alley to die, and a whole team of nurses and physicians, including Candy, had worked for weeks to save her small life.

Perhaps she'd identified with the infant. As a child she'd been abandoned too, first by her parents, then by a series of relatives. At the baby's funeral, given by the county, Candy had sworn never to love again—not anything or anybody. She'd handed in her resignation and found another job.

The next day Candy called Mr. Becker to ask him to drop the charges against her. He refused to speak with her. The calls she made regarding the goat were equally frustrating. So far ten people had hung up on her, and it was still early in the morning. She sighed and dialed Wade's office number.

At least *he* sounded pleasant. "Candy! I was just going to call you. How about dinner tonight?"

Did the man have an aversion to his office? "Wade, we have to talk about going to court. Can I come to your office?"

"I'm going to be out most of the day. Shall I make reservations for six o'clock."

To Candy's surprise, and somewhat to her dismay, Wade proved to be a perfect gentleman that night. Except for idle chit-chat, he practically ignored her. The moment they finished eating, he drew out his briefcase, spread papers over the table, and began to write down the necessary information as he asked her questions.

After that date, Wade didn't call her the rest of the week. She received a brief letter from his secretary reminding her of the date and time of her court appearance, but nary a word arrived from the man himself.

On the appointed day in court, Candy, with Fly on her lap and the parasol in her hand, sat quietly next to Wade, and when they approached the judge's bench, Mr. Becker's attorney spoke first. Candy was stunned as she listened. In a few short words he made her sound like a modern day Lizzie Borden. Appalled, she glanced at Wade, whose expression remained smug: Together he and Candy stepped forward.

"Your honor, my client freely admits to having hit Mr. Becker with her parasol," Wade began. "As you can see, it is hardly a lethal weapon, and in the hands of such a slight woman, could not

have caused more than a minor scratch. The incident occurred after Mr. Becker threatened with bodily harm the poor, defenseless creature she is holding in her arms. . . ."

When he was finished the judge slammed down his gavel "Judgment for the plaintiff for the sum of five dollars! Ms. Lewis, I would advise you to leave your parasol and the monkey at home in the future. And Mr. Becker, I would advise you not to try to bilk any more insurance companies. Case dismissed!"

Candy exclaimed, turning to Wade. "That's it? That's all I have to do?"

"All that's left is to pay the baliff five dollars." Wade helped Candy into her trench coat and guided her outside. "And then, of course, you still have to pay my fee."

Surprised, she glanced up at him. His fee! She'd forgotten. "Wade, how much do I owe you?"

Wade, smiling, suggested that she simply treat him to dinner. When Candy said that she had promised to babysit for a little girl named Sally, he suggested that Sally come along with them.

"You don't mind?" Candy asked in astonishment.

"Why should I mind? Did you think we were going out on a date?" he asked. "This is a business dinner, merely payment of my fee. I can understand if you have another responsibility."

After picking up Sally, Wade suggested a French restaurant he knew, which turned out to be elegant and terribly expensive. Their meal was marvelous, tasteful and impeccably served. Sally behaved like an angel, and Candy was surprised to discover that she felt relaxed and was having a marvelous time.

Later when they got back to the apartment, Candy felt so grateful to him for not actually charging her for his legal services, that she invited him in for coffee.

He accepted.

"If you'll watch Sally, I'll grind the coffee beans," she said, suddenly glad she had Sally around as a distraction. When she walked into the living room, carrying two steaming mugs, Wade was holding open the front door, and Sally's mother was standing in the entrance.

"Denna! You're home early." Candy glanced at Wade, her heart sinking. A single eyebrow was arched again, and he was grinning wider than a Cheshire cat.

Denna shrugged. "The movie was boring, and Mel didn't like my casserole. I missed Sally, so I thought I'd come pick her up. Has she been a good girl?"

"Yes," Wade answered, "we've enjoyed her company immensely. In fact, we're really going to miss her. Isn't that right, Candy?"

Wade waved after them as they walked out, then finally closing the door, he folded his arms over his chest and smiled. For a long moment he didn't speak, just grinned smugly. "Well, Candy," he said at last, "it appears we're alone. And now that our business arrangement is concluded, I'm no longer your lawyer."

He walked toward her and pushed her hair back from her face in a tender gesture. Candy stood mesmerized as Wade swept her into his arms. Slowly, so slowly that she could count the endless seconds, his lips descended to hers.

"Candy," Wade breathed against her throat. "Oh, Candy. I want to make love to you, but I need to know... are you sure you want that, too?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. I'm certain, Wade. I want you so much."

After he closed the bedroom door behind them, he gathered her close, crushing her to his length. Pausing only to rid them both of their clothes, he began a sensuous assault on her body. Thrilling to his touch, Candy pressed against him, the evidence of his arousal like fire against her

thighs.

As they fell together across the bed, Wade made love to Candy gently, slowly, his hands bringing her to the pinnacle of pleasure and back so many times that she wanted to cry out with frustration.

"Wade," she moaned. "Love me now."

"I've waited a long time for this," he murmured, and when he kissed her again, she moaned. His hands on her flesh increased her fervor, and she arched toward him. Consumed with need, she felt as if a storm had swept through her and had left her ravaged on the shore. But he didn't stop; he discovered every secret place and tortured her with his touch, his lips.

"Oh, Lord, Candy. I need you so," Wade whispered as their bodies finally became one.

"You're beautiful, Candy," Wade said afterward, gathering her close and pushing her hair back from her sweat-dampened forehead. "So very beautiful."

Unable to stop the tears that brimmed in her eyes, she turned away, feeling foolish.

Wade's hands on her shoulders forced her to face him. He kissed away the moisture. "Is something wrong, Candy? Wasn't it good for you?"

"Oh, Wade." Now she was really crying. She felt silly, utterly ridiculous. Their lovemaking had been totally fulfilling. Why couldn't she say so? She buried her face in his chest as he held her close, wanting to lie there forever. What was she going to do? What she was beginning to feel for Wade was too frightening to contemplate and certainly too frightening to admit. She couldn't trust any man, not after what Marc had done to her. She couldn't allow herself the luxury of caring again. There was too much at stake—and she would be the one who got hurt. That was the pattern of her life.

She had only one choice now.

She had to cut it off immediately, before she fell completely in love with him.

Candy spent most of the night tossing restlessly. Wade slept soundly. When he finally woke up, he stretched lazily and grinned at her, saying good morning in his distinctly husky voice.

A dark stubble shadowed his face. Steeling herself against the tender emotions welling up inside, Candy got up and walked to her closet and pulled out a pair of jeans. "You can use the bathroom first," she said tersely.

"Candy, is something wrong?" he said, giving her a sharp glance.

Now was as good a time as any to scare him off. She crossed her fingers, hoping God would forgive her for the lie. "No, not really. I just find it awkward facing my lovers the next morning."

Wade swung off the bed and stalked toward her. "I see. Am I supposed to gather that you've had many lovers?"

"Enough," she said shortly, starting to walk around him. But his body had become a barrier.

"I don't believe you've had lots of lovers," he said coldly, each word clipped and hard. "I won't ever believe that about you."

She hadn't expected him to be angry. Surprised perhaps, but not angry. Hoping she appeared nonchalant, Candy shrugged and rifled through her closet, pretending to look for a shirt. "You're welcome to think anything you like."

"All right, Candy!" Unexpectedly, he spun her around to face him, looking angrier than anyone Candy had ever seen. She tried to pull away. "Why are you trying to pick a fight with me? Why are you upset?" he demanded. His fingers pressed into her flesh, holding her firmly.

"Wade, you're hurting me."

"I don't mean to hurt you, but you're going to tell me what the hell's the matter."

"Why does something have to be wrong?" she asked. "Can't we go our separate ways without an argument?"

"Candy, just what the hell are you talking about?"

"Wade, I'm trying to tell you that whatever we've had together is over. It was fun, but now it's over."

There was a long pause before he spoke again. "Let me get this straight. You're saying you don't want to see me again. Just like that?"

"Yes." She forced a stiff smile. "Just like that!"

"Candy. I don't believe that what happened between us last night meant so little to you."

"I told you it was fun. What more do you want me to say? Okay, it was wonderful. You're an excellent lover. Now, I'd really like to use the bathroom."

"Dammit, Candy, you're lying."

"Wade, I'm sorry if you're disappointed," she said, steeling herself. "But I told you once that I'm happy with my life just the way it is. Maybe I haven't made it clear enough that I don't want to get involved with anyone."

"We're already involved, Candy. We made love to each other last night. Look, I don't know why you're trying to shut me out, but I do know that what we shared last night wasn't casual for either of us."

Growing angry, she jerked away from him. "What we shared last night was sex, no more, no less. Why can't you accept that? Lust is hardly a life-sustaining miracle."

"What we feel for each other isn't lust, Candy." He pulled her back into his arms. "This is lust." His embrace was harsh and rough, yet Candy felt herself responding to his kiss.

She wrenched away. "You've just proven my point. Sex doesn't solve anything. Wade."

"Neither does running away. Look at

yourself, Candy. You deny that you need anything or anybody. Yet you surround yourself with pets and children. Every single thing you do is reaching out for love. If you are trying to shut me out so that you don't have to deal with hurt and rejection, all you're accomplishing is the reverse. Can you stand here and tell me that you're not hurting—right now, at this very moment? Can you deny that it's not tearing you apart to tell me to leave?"

She couldn't listen to any more. "Don't you understand English? Thanks for a fun evening. You were great in bed, but I don't want to see you again."

The silence that followed vibrated with tension. Then in one swift, angry swoop, he picked up his clothes and started to jerk them on. "All right, Candy. I don't believe that's what you really want, but I'll be glad to comply with your wishes. If you ever grow up and realize that you're throwing away something meaningful, give me a call. See you around."

Her heart twisted with the agony of losing him, but she steeled herself to accept the burning ache. It was better to hurt now than later, when there was no turning back.

A week passed, and Candy changed her mind from one moment to the next, wanting to call Wade yet afraid to pick up the telephone. She kept busy working at Merry Messages, baby-sitting, and visiting Mr. Callahan at the nursing home.

Although the old man was still not speaking, Candy chatted with his niece for several hours, glad to hear that arrangements were being made for him to live in her home.

Candy was getting ready to leave when, completely out of the blue, Mr. Callahan called, "Candace!"

It was the first word he had spoken in weeks, and it brought tears to Candy's

eyes.

Mr. Callahan's niece stood up from her chair, her eyes riveted on her granduncle. "Yes?" Candy said to Mr. Callahan.

He looked up at her accusingly. "You never brought the red-hots."

"You're right," she said, kissing his wrinkled cheek. "I didn't, but I will."

Candy felt as if someone had just given her the world on a string, and a sunny mood stayed with her all the way home. She realized that she couldn't be afraid of life any longer. It was time to come out of hiding, even if it eventually caused her pain. For a long time she had vacillated about whether or not to return to nursing, but now she knew she was able to face the agony of losing babies as well as the joy of saving them. Before she could change her mind again, she picked up the phone, dialed *Merry Messages*, and resigned, effectively immediately.

Then she called the hospital, and the next day she reported back to work as a nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit. Within days, Candy felt as though she'd never left.

Two weeks went by, and the afternoon she upgraded a patient from a critical to just serious condition, she decided it was time to call Wade. She could hardly wait to get home.

She caught him at the office on his private line. For a long moment she couldn't speak. "Wade?" she finally got out. "This is Candy."

Another awkward silence followed. Her heart pounded in her throat. "There's a quaint French restaurant on the near north side," she said. "I was wondering if you were hungry and would like to go with me."

More anxious than ever, Candy waited for his answer.

"I'm starved," he said at last, with what sounded like a sigh of relief. "Is

Sally free, too?"

When Wade walked into her apartment later that evening, he just stood and stared at her for several minutes.

"I thought you were never going to call," he said, his voice catching. "I'd almost given up."

Candy smiled, "I wanted to tell you that I've gone back to nursing," she said.

Wade's face lit up. "Candy, that's great. I'm so happy for you."

She licked her lips and shifted uneasily under Wade's steady gaze. Why were they so nervous with each other? He wanted to take her into his arms, she could tell. The restraint he was exercising was evident. And she wanted him, too. She wanted to lean her head against his chest. She wanted to revel in the comfort of his embrace. Desperately she wanted to feel the warmth of his body next to hers. But all she could get out was a whisper, "I've missed you, Wade."

In a few quick strides he crossed the distance between them and swept her into his arms. "Oh, Candy, I need you," he murmured, gathering her close. "I need you so damn much."

Wade's lips were soft and warm against hers, and the emotions she had suppressed these past weeks surged back in full force, a raging tempest inside her. Wade groaned and gathered her even tighter against his long length. In answer to his silent question, Candy entwined her hands in his hair.

"Don't you want to go out to dinner?" he asked thickly.

"Later," she murmured, running her hands along the buttons of his shirt and down to his belt buckle. "Much later."

After they had closed the bedroom door, Wade took her into his arms again and tenderly undressed her, then drew her to the bed. The touch of his hand on her skin, the whisper of his lips along her

body, made her want to cry out with unfulfilled passion. Sensations unlike anything she'd ever felt before simmered inside her; she was like a caldron ready to explode into hundreds of colorful fireworks.

As though memorizing the form and texture of her skin, Wade caressed her until she was quivering with need. Just when she thought she couldn't stand another moment without fulfillment, Wade arched above her, and she welcomed him joyously, wantonly. There weren't enough stars in the universe to account for the fiery display that raged through her body, blazed in an incandescent kaleidoscope, then banked to a soft glow.

Long afterward, she continued to lie languorous and sated in his arms.

"Hungry yet?" Wade pushed back her hair and planted tiny kisses along her temple.

"Ravenous," she said, and they got up and went into the kitchen and raided the refrigerator.

Later, they took Rover for a walk along the lakefront. The beach was quiet and peaceful. Candy shivered in the night air, and Wade draped his jacket across her shoulders. "Summer's on the wane," he said. "It's almost August."

Above them, the moon hung low over the water, and tiny stars shone in the dark sky like lovely crystal beams. They sat on a pile of boulders, and Wade pulled her close.

"If I had my way," said Candy, "I would be relaxing on a sandy beach, living in Florida. I cringe at the thought of another Chicago winter."

"Any other dreams?" he asked.

"I'd like all the babies at the hospital to survive," she said.

"I'm glad you've gone back, Candy."

"So am I. But what about you? Don't you have any dreams?"

"I'd like to have my own law firm."

Candy was surprised. "Without Cunningham, Cunningham, Cunningham, Abernathy, and Finch?"

He nodded. "My real interest is criminal law."

"Does your family know that?"

"Abernathy is terrified at the thought that I'll end up a pauper. Unless you're famous, criminal lawyers aren't as financially secure as corporate attorneys. But I've talked a lot about setting up my own firm. One of these days I'll just do it."

Arms entwined, they walked slowly back to her apartment and went to bed. Wade held her all night long, curled warmly against his body.

For the next several weeks Candy was constantly busy. She worked the first shift at the hospital, from seven in the morning until three-thirty in the afternoon. Most days she rushed from the hospital to the nursing home to visit with Mr. Callahan. He expected to be discharged any day now. He was his old self again: charming, witty, and thoroughly delightful. On her days off, Candy volunteered at the Abandoned Animal Welfare League, making telephone calls and doing paperwork. Evenings she spent with Wade. There were times when she felt she was on a roller-coaster ride, unsure of her emotions, uncertain of what she wanted, afraid of making a final commitment.

One morning at work they had a new admission on the unit. A baby John Doe, abandoned at the emergency room door. He weighed only seven hundred grams, and it was a miracle he was alive at all.

Steeling herself to concentrate on the tasks ahead, Candy helped insert lifesaving tubes into the tiny body. When they had stabilized the child's condition as much as possible, she placed a small, colorful wool cap over Johnny's head to prevent heat loss from his scalp.

The neonatal unit was cheerfully decorated to help boost the morale of the anxious families and of the tense staff. When the alien cry of an infant who had just been taken off a respirator was finally heard among the alarms and hissing of machinery, every person in the unit—doctors, nurses, therapists, and visiting parents—would all pause for a moment of silent celebration.

Candy watched Johnny all morning, hovering over him, alert to the slightest sign of a change in his condition. The respirator breathed for him; intravenous solution gave him nourishment. Yet, despite all the advances in treating the neonate, Candy felt an acute sense of helplessness.

Late in the afternoon, Dr. Carlson turned to her and sighed. They were both going off duty soon, and Johnny's condition hadn't improved. "You know," he said, "there are times when I wish I'd never gone to medical school."

Candy cooked dinner for Wade that night, and her fears for Johnny's life came pouring out of her as they talked. She was amazed at the ease she felt with him; it was as if she had known and loved him forever.

When they were finished eating, Wade suddenly pulled her close.

"I'd like to stay with you tonight, but I can't. I have to be at the office at the crack of dawn. Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine." The warmth and security she always felt in his arms enveloped her, and she rested her head against his chest. She loved him so very, very much.

For several long moments he held her. But he seemed distracted, lost in his own thoughts. Candy had a strange feeling that he was disturbed, but when he pulled away, he was smiling his charming, crooked grin. "Good. Don't forget, I have tickets for *The King and I* on Tues-

day."

"Won't I see you tomorrow?"

"I'll call you."

"I love you, Wade." Candy was astonished by her abrupt admission.

Wade paused and turned swiftly around. He looked surprised. "Me, too," he said huskily. "Candy..."

"What?" His expression was so serious.

"Never mind."

The next morning, Johnny was still stable. The day passed in a blur of frantic efforts to maintain his condition. Candy left work late, and got home close to ten o'clock.

Exhausted, she collapsed in bed after a quick dinner. Tomorrow was Tuesday, and since it was her day off, she'd promised to visit Mr. Callahan.

Tuesday! Lord; she had a date with Wade on Tuesday.

Suddenly, she realized she hadn't heard from him. That was strange. But perhaps he'd tried to call, and she hadn't been home. She glanced at the clock, but decided against telephoning him.

The next morning she took the bus to see Mr. Callahan. She spent several hours longer than she'd intended chatting with him and his grandniece and then her bus was delayed in traffic on the way home.

At her apartment landing, she breathed a sigh of relief because Wade wasn't already waiting. He was always so punctual.

When Candy first unlocked her door, she couldn't believe the disaster that confronted her. Shredded newspapers and litter, overturned plants, and bits of torn draperies lay strewn across the living room floor. Fly was sitting in the middle of the room eating a piece of paper, and Rover was barking frantically. If she weren't so angry, Candy would have laughed. Instead, she grabbed for the dog

first and locked him in the kitchen, then headed for the monkey.

When she was caught, Fly instantly reverted to a subdued state and cuddled against Candy, chattering softly.

"I'm going to have to buy a padlock," she scolded as she tucked the monkey back into the cage.

By the time Candy cleaned up, it was very late. She rushed to take a shower.

At eight o'clock, she poured herself a glass of milk and nibbled on a cracker. By eight-thirty, she was ravenous. She was also concerned. Something was wrong! He was never late. In fact, his punctuality often irked the devil out of her.

She tried to call his office, but there was no answer on his private line. There was no answer at his home either. She left a note on her door and took Rover to the park for a brief walk. When she returned, Wade still hadn't arrived.

It was close to midnight when she finally undressed and went to bed. She kept a tight rein on her emotions, trying not to acknowledge the fears that rose to haunt her. Wade would not walk out on her. She knew him too well to even consider that possibility. So what if she hadn't heard from him since Sunday night? She trusted him.

Despite her rationalizations, Candy tossed restlessly all night, and she didn't bother to call Wade the next morning. Doing so would lend credence to her silly imaginings. She went to work, certain that she would hear from him.

Johnny's condition had been upgraded to fair, but during rounds Candy grew concerned. His heart rate was increasing significantly. She pulled out her stethoscope to listen to his lungs. Since he was so small and hardly had the strength to move, he didn't fight or wave his arms and legs as some babies might. The battle he waged was internal, silent. Except for the machinery that recorded every change

in his condition, she wouldn't have noticed anything wrong.

Dr. Carlson looked worried, too. "Damn! I think he's going into heart failure. Let's decrease his fluids and give him a diuretic."

Despite their efforts, by midmorning, Johnny was going rapidly downhill. Side by side, Candy and Dr. Carlson worked on him all day. If they decreased his fluids to keep his heart from overworking, he became dehydrated and his electrolyte balance went out of kilter. If they increased his fluids, his heart rate soared.

When the next shift came on, Candy left the hospital, mentally and physically exhausted. When she got home, she found a note taped to her apartment door. It was from Denna, asking Candy to baby-sit for Sally on Friday night. Her disappointment was so acute that she closed her eyes and rested her head against the door. Where the hell was Wade?

She debated for an hour before picking up the telephone and calling Wade's office.

"Mr. Abernathy is the only partner in the office today," the secretary said in a frosty voice. "Shall I ring him?"

"Candace!" Charles Abernathy boomed out when they were connected. "How nice of you to call. What can I do for you? Has Mr. Becker been bothering you?"

"No, I haven't heard from Mr. Becker." A horrible sinking feeling had settled in her stomach. "Is Wade around?"

"Wade?"

"Yes, Wade Cunningham the Third, your partner?"

"Oh, Wade. Why no, he's not here."

"When do you expect him?"

"Not until Friday. He decided to take a few extra days, sort of a minivacation in Florida." Charles Abernathy chuckled. "Are you anxious, dear?"

That was an understatement. "Just a bit."

"Yes, I can imagine, what with Saturday being such a big day up in Kenilworth. We're all delighted."

"A big day?" Candy asked.

"The wedding, dear. What else?"

For the longest time Candy sat at the telephone, unable to speak. Thoughts tumbled about in her head—fragmented pieces bombarding her from all sides.

"Wade wanted to keep everything simple, but as I understand it, Miriam's planned quite a shindig," Charles Abernathy continued cheerfully. "Hasn't she called you?"

"No, I haven't heard from her."

"She's probably busy, and no wonder. You young people have such whirlwind romances these days. I didn't think any girl would ever snare our Wade and get him to move away from his family and friends, but apparently I was wrong. And so soon, too."

"We must have a bad connection," Candy said. "What did you say?"

"I was saying," he replied loudly, "that I was surprised to hear that Wade is getting married. I didn't think any girl could snare that boy and end his bachelor days. And to get him to move to Florida to open a law practice. Astonishing!"

Astonishing? More like the shock of the century!

"Yes," she said slowly, trying to hold back the rising pain. "Yes, it is a surprise. When is Wade due back?"

"He'll be in Miami for a few more days, but don't you worry. He'll be back soon. The way everything transpired, I'm just glad he gave us a couple days notice."

"Yes, good thing," Candy agreed, clenching and unclenching her fists in her lap. To her surprise, she saw that her sharp nails had broken the top layer of skin on her palms. "Mr. Abernathy, when did Wade leave?"

"Why, Monday morning."

As realization penetrated to her numb brain, hurt and rage swelled within her.

"Candace, are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Are you all right? Oh, dear. I hope I haven't let the cat out of the bag."

"I'm sorry to cut you short," she answered, "but I have to go now. Mr. Abernathy. Thank you for all your help."

"You're welcome, dear. Anything for a Heinz." He chuckled.

She hung up the telephone and walked slowly to the patio door. A slight breeze moved the curtains, and she could hear noises coming from the park.

Wade Cunningham is getting married?
The refrain beat through her mind over and over.

Rover wagged his tail and licked her face. Candy started to cry, releasing the emotions she'd held in check for three days. She had to face it sometime—what she'd known all along would happen. Wade was gone. He'd walked out of her life as casually as he'd entered it. How was she going to get through the next few days? How was she going to survive?

Candy slept very little that night, and the next day she was exhausted, but since the afternoon shift was short a nurse, she volunteered to work overtime. It was well past midnight when she got home, and she was due back on duty by seven.

Rover greeted her eagerly as she leafed through her mail. Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed a postcard tucked among the pile of bills. A red haze of anger obliterated all other emotions. Darn the man! After dumping her, he had the nerve to send her greetings. The postmark was Wednesday—two days ago.

"Candy, you're right!" he'd written. *"The beaches are heavenly. Actually, I've been busy day and night, so I haven't had time to enjoy them. I'll lounge around*

next week. I reserved a suite at the Hilton. I hope I didn't surprise you too much with my sudden, crazy plans. I couldn't wait. Thanks to you, I've decided the hell with practicality. Oh, I ordered a fireplace in the house, and I found a children's zoo for Billie. Love Wade."

Love Wade? She shredded the postcard into bits and tossed it into the garbage can.

Friday morning it started to rain. How fitting, Candy thought as she stared out the window of the intensive care unit. She sighed and sipped her coffee. In five minutes she was due to accompany Johnny to surgery. The baby needed a tracheotomy. The tube in his throat had been in place too long. She glanced over at the isolette where the tiny infant lay so still and silent, then up at the cardiac monitor.

"If his heart rate doesn't slow down, we're going to lose him," Dr. Carlson said, joining her at the window.

"I know." Candy dumped her coffee into the sink. "Do you think he'll make it?"

"Truthfully, I can't say. Sometimes I wish I had a crystal ball. I think I could predict things with more accuracy." The doctor glanced at her sharply. "You look tired, Candy. You've been putting in too many hours. Go home early tonight and get some rest. I don't want to lose one of my best nurses to exhaustion."

She simply nodded. What she needed was to forget Wade Cunningham.

That afternoon she put Johnny back on the critical list. For the longest time, she stood beside his crib and held his tiny hand. The respirator was still breathing for him, except now it was attached to an opening in his throat. Intravenous solution still dripped nourishment into his body. But Johnny was getting worse. Now he had started to twitch from a calcium deficiency. What more could go wrong?

Please live, Johnny, she pleaded silently. Please make it through this crisis. I can't lose you, too.

A steady rain pelted Candy as she walked from the bus stop to her apartment later that afternoon, but she hardly noticed. How was she going to occupy herself all night long? She could think of little except her own misery. She unlocked the door to her building and trudged slowly up the stairs to her apartment... and abruptly stopped in surprise on the last stair landing.

There, on the top step, umbrella in hand, sat Wade Cunningham.

Wade looked tired. Dark stubble covered his cheeks, and his rumpled overcoat appeared as though he'd been sitting in it for hours. When he looked up and saw Candy, he grinned. "Hi." He held up the umbrella. "I guess it's my turn to play Mary Poppins."

For a moment, Candy saw an entire spectrum of red. What the hell was he doing here? "What can I do for you, Mary?" she retorted, walking around him. "A legal brief, perhaps? Commitment papers?"

A frown marred Wade's brow, but he kept smiling. "You got my postcard?"

"Yes, it came yesterday."

"Good. I wasn't certain it would arrive before the weekend." He grinned again.

Candy unlocked her door and tried to close it in his face, but Wade stepped inside directly behind her, his expression puzzled. She was all the more irritated when Rover greeted Wade enthusiastically, jumping and barking as if he were a long-lost friend.

"You haven't been home," Wade said over the noise.

"No kidding." Candy tossed her purse on the sofa.

"I've been waiting for hours. I came straight from the airport. I thought you

got off duty at three."

"Bingo! You win the prize. Three o'clock it is!"

Wade stared at her, his eyebrows a dark slash across his forehead. If she didn't know better, Candy would have sworn he was confused.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"At the hospital."

"I see." An awkward silence descended. Finally Wade said: "Candy is something wrong? You're acting awfully strange."

"What could be wrong?"

"I don't know. I arrived just a few hours ago, but for some crazy reason I thought you would be happy to see me. You said you loved me. I thought—"

"Happy?" She almost laughed. "You thought I would be *happy*? Lord, Wade, you've got to be the most brazen man I've ever met."

"You're angry."

"Of course I'm angry! And don't patronize me, Wade Cunningham!"

"Candy, I bought a house and a criminal law practice in Florida—"

"So what do you want from me? Congratulations?" She slammed her stethoscope onto a table and kicked off her shoes. "Fine, I'll say it," she went on. "Congratulations and best wishes. Make sure you get a good draft on the fireplace, otherwise the fire won't light."

He stared at her as though she'd lost her mind. "Look, I'm sorry if I've disappointed you. I thought I'd figured out all your moods, but I don't understand what's gotten into you. I realize I was a bit unorthodox. Maybe moonlight and roses would have been a better approach, but dammit, what's the difference? I've been gone nearly a week. Aren't you even glad to see me?"

"I'm thrilled and delighted to see you, Wade. Can't you tell?"

Now he was getting angry. The muscle

in his cheek had started to twitch. "Frankly, no. I worked day and night to get back early just so we could spend some time together tonight. I thought we had a lot to discuss."

"We sure do have a lot to discuss, but aren't you due back soon? Since you're the groom, I expect you have a lot to do tonight. Don't you have to rent a tuxedo?"

"I wasn't going to wear a tuxedo, but if you want me to, I will."

She whirled around to face him. Of all the gall! "What do I have to do with it?"

"A great deal, I would think. Didn't you help Miriam with the plans?"

"No, I didn't help Miriam with the plans," she mimicked. Did he think she was that stupid?

"Wait a minute, Candy." He let out a deep sigh. "I've had one hell of a day. I landed in the middle of a thunderstorm after a three-hour flight. I stood in the rain for hours waiting for you. Finally I picked the damned lock downstairs, and then I sat on the steps for another hour. Now, I may be tired, but something's wrong here. Are we talking about the same thing?"

By now she was crying. "You're getting married in the morning, and Johnny is dying. Lord, Wade, why are you so intent on hurting me?"

Suddenly Wade's expression changed. Along with comprehension, relief dawned on his features. Relief? What an odd thing to read in his face. But Candy didn't have time to wonder at his behavior, for he quickly gathered her close, holding her tight against his body. "I'm so sorry, hon."

Despite everything, it felt good to be in his arms. She rested her head on his chest and cried. She cried for Johnny, for Wade, for all the times she had been deceived by love.

Wade kissed her forehead tenderly.

"Candy, seriously, what do you think of Miami?"

If he was going to live in Miami with someone else, she hated it. She shrugged.

"It's a nice city."

"It's warm there in the winter. I don't think they've ever had a snowstorm. The beaches are really nice, too. Did I tell you I finally got to lounge around on one? Five minutes before I caught the plane home, I had a drink and walked in the sand."

Her head was still buried against his chest.

"Disney World is only a few hours away. And there's a neonatal intensive care unit. And a veterinarian who specializes in primate leukemia. Did you know there are specialists in the field?"

"No."

He was gently circling his hands on her back, and she didn't want to pull away.

"All things considered," he went on, "Miami sounds like a fairly attractive place to live."

Candy nodded against his chest.

"Then tell me, Candy," he said, stroking her hair back from her temple. "Explain to me why you don't want to marry me and live there?"

"Marry you?" She pulled back and stared up at him. The expression on his face was so sincere, so tender. "Me? Why don't I want to marry you...?"

"That's what I asked."

"I thought you were marrying someone else!"

"Candy, how could you think I was marrying anyone but you?"

"You didn't call me! You left town."

"I was called away Monday morning on business. We had a crisis with one of our accounts in Miami. Dad was in New York, and my grandfather wasn't familiar with the case. I tried to call you at the hospital several times, once from the airport, but you were never available. The

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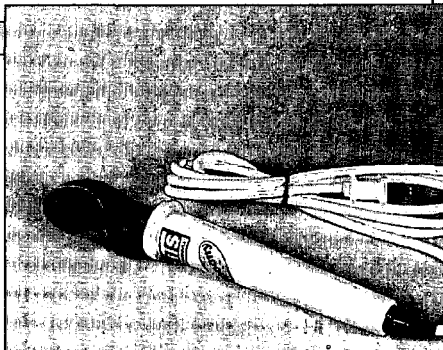
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secretary in the neonatal unit said you were in a meeting, and she hung up before I could leave a message."

"One of the babies had turned critical."

"I tried to contact you again later that night."

"I got home late."

"Finally, on Tuesday, when I decided I didn't want to wait for the moonlight and roses, I sent a telegram."

"Tuesday? Oh, no. Fly must have eaten your telegram! She figured out how to undo the twister seals. There was such a mess..." Candy's voice trailed off. She felt incredibly stupid. "I'm sorry, Wade. Sometimes I just don't think clearly. But Sunday night you were so distant. I thought you felt trapped into something you didn't want."

"You're absolutely right. Sunday night I was trying to figure out how to ask you to marry me. You looked so tired, and I didn't want to pressure you. I knew things weren't going well at the hospital. But when I got to Miami, I decided the hell with waiting. I loved you too much to wait for an opportune moment to propose, so I tried to call. Finally I sent the telegram."

"What did it say?"

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you." His grin was mischievous.

How could he torment her this way? "You're teasing me! You've been teasing me all along, telling me about Miami. Wade, I swear—"

"You swear what?" he interrupted, laughing. Then his expression grew serious again, and he was staring at her out of unfathomable blue eyes. "Candy, I want us to be a happily married couple. I want to have children with you. I want to go to Disney World with our sons and daughters. I want to make mistakes together as parents. I want to take care of you and lie beside you. I want to hold you when you're sad, and I want to share your

triumphs and your zany life with kids and pets and friends. I want to walk on the beach with you and sit in front of a fire with you. I want to watch you grow old and tease you when you get gray hair. I want to be your friend, your husband, your lover. I want to be with you forever. I love you, Candace Lewis, muddled thinking and all."

A wild, sweet tempest of longing claimed her as his lips met hers, arousing her with need.

"Wade," she said. "I'm sorry I doubted you. It's just that Marc—"

He touched his fingers to her lips. "Shh. You don't have to say it. Candy, I know your husband told you he loved you and then betrayed you. There's no way I can reassure you that won't happen again. All I can say is that, when I promise to love and honor, it will be forever."

Her love shone in her eyes. "What more could I want?"

"Then you accept?"

She threw her arms around him. "I do. Oh, I do."

He swung her exuberantly around the room, then kissed her again. "You'd better remember to say that tomorrow. We're getting married in the morning."

Suddenly the telephone rang and Candy picked it up, her heart sinking when she recognized Dr. Carlson's voice.

"Candy," he said, "I thought you'd like to know we won this round. Johnny pulled out of the crisis."

She closed her eyes and murmured a silent prayer of thanks.

"Get some rest," Dr. Carlson added. "I'll see you Monday."

"The hospital?" Wade asked when she hung up.

Candy nodded. "Johnny's okay? Wade, I think he's going to make it."

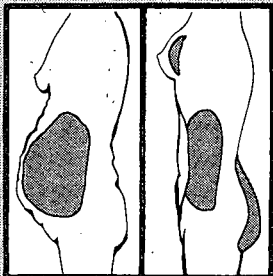
"How can he miss, with you on his side?" Wade took her into his arms. "I love you, Candy." ♥

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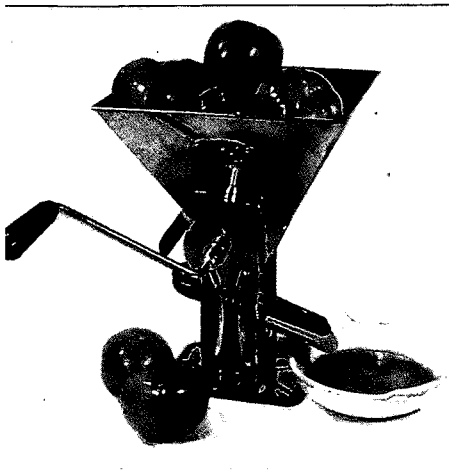
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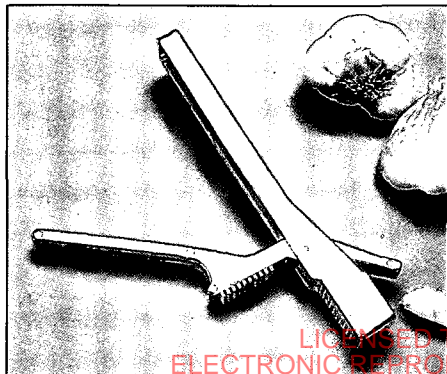
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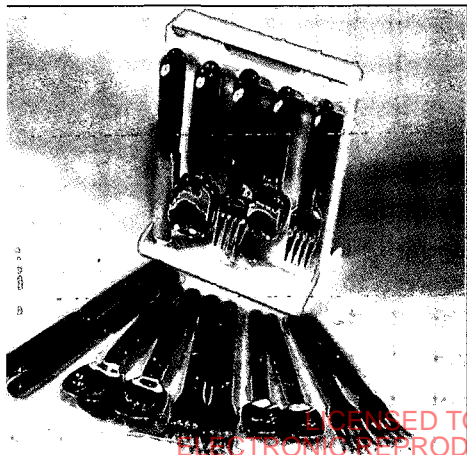
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